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Postcolonial Environments

Nature, Culture and the Contemporary Indian Novel in English

Upamanyu Pablo Mukherjee

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Also by Upamanyu Pablo Mukherjee

CRIME AND EMPIRE: the Colony in Nineteenth-Century Fictions of Crime

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Arts & Humanities
Research Council

First published 2010 by
PALGRAVE MACMILLAN

Palgrave Macmillan in the UK is an imprint of Macmillan Publishers Limited, registered in England, company number 785998, of Houndmills, Basingstoke, Hampshire RG21 6XS.

Palgrave Macmillan in the US is a division of St Martin's Press LLC, 175 Fifth Avenue, New York, NY 10010.

Palgrave Macmillan is the global academic imprint of the above companies and has companies and representatives throughout the world.

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ISBN 978–0–230–21937–3 hardback

This book is printed on paper suitable for recycling and made from fully managed and sustained forest sources. Logging, pulping and manufacturing processes are expected to conform to the environmental regulations of the country of origin.

A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library.

A catalog record for this book is available from the Library of Congress.

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1
19 18 17 16 15 14 13 12 11 10

Printed and bound in Great Britain by
CPI Antony Rowe, Chippenham and Eastbourne

Contents

Acknowledgements

I am grateful to the Arts and Humanities Research Council (UK) for a research leave award that enabled me to think about finishing this book. Warwick University matched this generosity by granting me a term's leave, and I can confidently say that I would have remained stuck somewhere around Chapter 1 without the support of these two institutions.

Although it is only their names that make it to the covers, every author knows that books are entirely collaborative by nature. This one is no exception, and I cannot possibly mention all those without whom the thoughts and arguments here could not have taken shape. Some, however, must be named. In Warwick University, my colleagues in the English and Comparative Literary Studies department taught me how to listen, support, argue and think. I thank Neil Lazarus, Benita Parry, Graeme MacDonald, Rashmi Varma, Steve Shapiro, Nick Lawrence, Jon Mee, Peter Mack and Thomas Docherty for their friendship, wisdom and constructive criticisms. Liz Barry, Gill Frith and everyone else have been exemplary colleagues who have shared the burdens of teaching and administration of a very busy academic department, and thus made time and space for my own research. My students do not always realize how much I learn from them, but I do, and I am always grateful to them for speaking out and throwing me off balance. A number of other colleagues within and outside the UK have helped immensely by inviting me to lectures, seminars and conferences. Elleke Boehmer and Ankhi Mukherjee in Oxford, Elizabeth DeLoughrey and Saree Makdisi in California, Graham Huggan and Ananya Kabir in Leeds, and Neelam Srivastava and Mike Pincombe in Newcastle were perfect hosts and interlocutors, and much thanks are due to them for providing me with ideal platforms for some essential dry runs and fine tunings. I continue to learn from my teachers in Kolkata.

The staff of the Bodleian Library and the India Institute Library in Oxford, the British Library in London and Warwick University Library, continue to be amazingly resourceful and supportive. Not a line here would have been written without their help. Steven Hall, my editor at Palgrave Macmillan, made sure everything ran smoothly and answered my various, and no doubt irritating, queries promptly and helpfully. Barbara Slater has been the ideal copy-editor.

I must end by thanking my friends and family – they deserve a reward simply for putting up with me. The 'East Oxford Massive' – Tim, Jane, James, Abi, Jon, Patrick – often shook their collective heads in despair, but in the end fed me, gave me shelter and made me smile. Marcus, Phil, Jonny and others strung across Oxford, London, Berlin, Delhi, Kolkata and other far-flung cities, as well as the members of the various sports teams I unwisely persist with have pulled me through by sharing their lives with me. My mother, sister and brother in Kolkata continue to be irrationally proud and loving of me, thereby giving me a reason to go on. I always think of the Hiltons as my 'English family', and they have refused to give up on me.

Finally, this one is for Eliza – *compañera* – who is there, even when she leaves.

Introduction

Why postcolonial environments?

Let me begin by offering two snapshots of contemporary India to show the sense in which the term 'postcolonial environments' will be used in this book.

Snapshot one. On 19 September 2006, the *New York Times* ran a story by Somini Sengupta whose opening lines were almost Naipaulian in their bare, brutally effective cadence – 'Here in the center of India, on a gray Wednesday morning, a cotton farmer swallowed a bottle of pesticide and fell dead at the threshold of his small mud house' ('On India's farms'). The suicide of a farmer on a nondescript central Indian farm does not normally make it to the hallowed pages of a leading north American broadsheet. But as Sengupta notes in her report, the death of Anil Shinde, the farmer, was part of a tragic, and much larger scandal that could no longer be concealed behind the usual glowing platitudes that have appeared daily about India's 'progress' since 1991 after the country's acceptance of the neo-liberal economic model and the 'Washington consensus'. In 2003 alone (the most recent year for which such data was available for Sengupta), 17,107 farmers had killed themselves. Most died after drinking the very pesticide that was supposed to make the 'high-yield' seeds manufactured by giant agro-business transnational corporations like Monsanto bloom into profit-producing cash crops.

In fact, there are good reasons to believe that Sengupta drastically underestimated the scale of this tragedy. As Sainath (2009) points out, suicide data in India is collected by the National Crime Records Bureau, and figures are regularly massaged downwards. For example, women, who do most of the work on the farms, are not classified as

farmers and hence their suicides are not counted as 'farmers' suicides'. By Sainath's calculation, in the ten years between 1997 and 2007, 182,936 Indian farmers killed themselves. During the last half of this ten-year period, the average national farmers' suicide rate was about one every thirty minutes. Nearly two-thirds of these deaths occurred in the 'big five' cash crop growing states of Maharashtra, Karnataka, Andhra Pradesh, Madhya Pradesh and Chattisgarh. Sainath presents a compelling argument for the reasons behind this tragedy (Sainath 2009).

Nearly two decades of neo-liberal economic policies have had disastrous effects on both Indian agriculture and Indian farmers. Consider some hard facts: since 1991, the average household debt relative to income of Indian farmers has increased from 26 per cent to 48.6 per cent; in 1991 a kilogram of seeds cost Rs. 7, but by 2001 farmers were shelling out Rs. 350 for less than half a kilogram of 'hybrid' seeds (in the case of Monsanto's 'Bt cotton seed', this rises to a staggering Rs. 1800 for 450 grams); between 1991 and 2005, the per capita net availability of food in India actually *decreased*, from 510 grams to 422 grams – the average poor family has about 100 kilograms less food to eat every year than it did ten years ago (Sainath 2009). Plagued by the chronic indebtedness that is the result of the high price of corporate-owned seeds, having run out of water, which the 'hybrid' seeds demand in high quantities, and having seen the very soil become barren following the intensive use of chemical fertilizers, Indian farmers have been killing themselves in droves – their final act of consuming pesticide registering both a cry of rage and a naming of the forces that pushed them from life to death. On 6 May 2008, the *Independent*, a British newspaper, noted the suicide of the Indian 'farmer poet', Shrikrishna Kalamb. Bowed down by the usual toxic mix of the chronic debt trap and the corporatization of agriculture, Kalamb, who had described himself and his fellow Indian farmers as 'dumb hungry calves', wrote, 'My life is different/My death will be like untimely rain'. He then hanged himself (Buncombe and Hardikar 2008).

Snapshot two. On the morning of 14 March 2007, thousands of people, old and young, living in various villages of the Nandigram area of West Bengal had gathered in a multi-faith prayer meeting (Sameekshak 2007, p. 3). Somewhat uneasily, they noticed an unusually heavy police presence across a nearby canal and bridge. They also noticed a large number of armed men, dressed in khaki but with red tags around their wrists, accompanying the police. After the meeting, the villagers started a protest march against development proposals that would have deprived them of land and homes. Women and schoolchildren formed the front ranks in order to signal the people's non-violent intentions. Suddenly,

the police and their 'irregular' colleagues unleashed a volley of tear-gas and live bullets on the marchers. For the rest of that March day, and indeed, well into the night and the following day, the police and the 'irregular' forces went on a rampage – killing, burning, looting and raping – through the villages of Sonachura, Bhangabera, Adhikaripara and Gokulnagar (Sanhati 2007). At least fourteen people died, with hundreds injured and missing, and a large number of documented cases of rape (although this was not always officially reported to the police, since it was they who were largely committing the crime) (Amnesty International 2008). The various civil and human rights organizations and the media, who were finally allowed into the area days – or in some cases weeks or months – after the tragedy, recorded horrendous stories such as that of the seventeen-year-old high-school student, Imdadul Islam who had gone with his mother and sisters to the meeting. Hit by a bullet, he managed to run for a kilometre and hide in a field of sunflowers. There, he was discovered by some of the 'irregulars', and hacked to death with knives (Sameekshak 2007, p. 8). Or think of the heavily pregnant Nikoshi Das, who was dragged away by three policemen and gang-raped, and who, four days later, gave birth to a dead baby (Sameekshak 2007, pp. 8–9). The traumatized survivors of Nandigram called the thugs of the 'irregular' force, whom they appeared to fear even more than the police, '*harmads'*. Derived from the word 'armada', this was the term used by the inhabitants of coastal southern Bengal in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries to describe the Spanish pirates whose raids plagued the area. As we will see again and again in what follows, the material registers of the flows between the past and the present, the colonial and the postcolonial periods, form a core cultural sensibility of contemporary India.

The seeds of the Nandigram tragedy of 2007 were sown in the previous year, when the state government of West Bengal signed a memorandum of agreement with the Salim industrial group of Indonesia in order to build a gigantic 'chemical hub' (Patkar et al. 2007, p. 18; Amnesty International 2008). On 28 December, plans were announced to acquire at least 4000 hectares of productive agricultural land to set up a 'special economic zone' (SEZ). In other words, as Stevan Kirschbaum (2007) of Boston's International Action Centre has noted, about 70,000 people were informed that their land would be seized, and 'some 127 primary schools, four secondary schools, three high schools, 112 temples, 42 masjids and countless houses, markets, shops' would be destroyed. Naturally, a large number of people from the 38 villages that comprise Nandigram organized to fight the prospect of this dispossession. After a deputation of the villagers had been fired on by the local police on 3 January 2007,

the Bhumi Ucched Pratirodh Committee (BUPC) or the Committee against Eviction was formed. And from January 2007 until that fateful day of 14 March, Nandigram saw an increasingly bitter series of conflicts between the BUPC and the police and the 'irregular' *harmad* force of the ruling communist party of the state (the CPI-M). On the one hand, the BUPC dug up roads and trenches, expelled known CPI-M members from their houses and engaged in skirmishes with the *harmads* (Patkar et al. 2007, p. 18; Amnesty International 2008); on the other, the state government ran an informal economic blockade of the area, continued to send in more *harmad* personnel and arms, and harassed media and civil and human rights organizations attempting to go to Nandigram – but they also offered verbal assurance that the SEZ plan had been scrapped in the face of popular resistance (Patkar et al. 2007, p. 18). This stalemate came to a head on 14 March, but did not end there.

The 2007 March outrages drew national and international condemnation of the state administration of West Bengal, and it officially announced the withdrawal of the plans to sell land to the Salim group. But discontent simmered on in Nandigram. There were no moves on the part of the West Bengal government to compensate the victims of the carnage. Government officials alleged that the BUPC had been infiltrated by Maoist and other opposition forces, and that it was systematically purging the area of CPI-M supporters and activists. Skirmishes between the warring parties continued, while the police mostly stood by. These skirmishes began to intensify towards the end of October 2007, as reports began to filter through about the massing of irregular *harmad* forces, the stockpiling of huge quantities of arms and the withdrawal of police positions from the Nandigram area (Patkar et al. 2007, p. 19). The West Bengal government was about to wage a 'war of liberation' to wrest back control over Nandigram. On 1 November, Mr Laxman Seth, the local CPI-M Member of Parliament issued a call to arms – 'We have been pushed to the wall. The only option now is to kill or get killed' (Patkar et al. 2007, p. 19). The next day, in an extended re-run of the March outrages, the *harmad* force began killing, torching and raping their way into the BUPC-dominated villages of Nandigram. West Bengal's Governor, Mr Gopalkrishna Gandhi, described the situation as a civil war and declared the 'recapture' an unlawful act (Amnesty International 2008). On 11 November 2007, CPI-M's State Secretary, Mr Shyamal Chakraborty, declared 'We have taken over Nandigram, and made it terror free.' Amnesty International recorded 'at least 15 people killed, 100 injured and hundreds more displaced', while acknowledging that the unofficial toll was much higher. (Kirschbaum 2007, citing the

statistics compiled by the Medical Service Centre – a group of volunteer doctors – puts the number of dead at around 100, that of displaced persons at 9205 and counts over 200 cases of rape.) Liberating victims of terror – a textbook example of what Orwell had called 'doublespeak' – turns out, as ever, itself to disguise a rampant act of state terrorism.

I offer these two glimpses into the everyday life of contemporary India to show the unavoidable intertwining of the terms 'postcolonial' and 'environment' as conceptual tools in our understanding of the state of the subcontinent, and I will suggest later, of Africa, Latin America and much of the rest of the world. The suicide of farmers and incidents of state terror are clearly, at one level, historical, political and economic matters. Yet, there is no way to understand these without paying attention to their material strata, one that is composed of soil, water, plants, crops, animals (both domestic and wild). The complex (and often conflict-ridden) web, field, or system – whatever we choose to call it – composed of the relationships between human and non-human agents or actors that define the history of the Indian subcontinent is what I understand as 'environment'. We should quickly note two things – first, that 'environment' is by no means limited, despite the two snapshots above, to rural India. On the contrary, urban spaces and their various relationships with the rural, or even 'waste' lands and areas not inhabited by humans, are also major environmental components. Second, although I am focusing on the *specific* context of the Indian subcontinent here, what I am suggesting is that my arguments have a *general* application to the understanding of large swathes of the world. This understanding of 'environment' as an integrated network of human and non-human agents acting historically is derived from a dialogue with a variety of critical traditions, and I will devote some space below – especially in Chapters 1 through 3 – to establishing this.

It is in my efforts to offer an argument that has, at the same time, specific and general validity, that the concept of 'postcolonial' becomes important. In common with theorists such as Dirlik (1997), Ahmad (1994), Lazarus (2004) and Young (2001), I take 'postcolonial' not as the sign of a clean historical break between the era of modern Euro-north American colonial domination and that of Asian, African, Latin American and Oceanic national self-determination; but rather as a historical condition of intensified and sustained exploitation of the majority of humans and non-humans of the former colonies by a cartel composed of their own and 'core' metropolitan European/north American elites. That is to say, the 'post' in postcolonial marks not an end of colonialism, but an end of a particular mode of colonialism

which then shifts its gears and evolves to another stage (obviously triggering a concomitant shift in the global struggles against it). The globalized ruling classes of this postcolonialism, whose interests are often embodied in gigantic transnational corporations and the labyrinthine world of speculative financial transactions, are often called the new cosmopolitans (Brennan 1997). Their presence, however, has long been registered, especially in the theories of neo-colonialism that emerged in the 1950s in the context of the end of formal European rule in Africa. This withdrawal, as the Ghanaian thinker and leader Kwame Nkrumah noted, led not to the end of the world imperial system, but to new forms of its entrenchment (1965, p. xi). The signature move of this neo-colonial system is systematically to uncouple power from responsibility, to remove or reduce all forms of redress, and to promote the emasculation of all national states and their capacities or even willingness to provide protection to their citizens (Nkrumah 1965, p. xi). When an Indian pesticide factory leaks lethal gas that kills and maims thousands, its victims find out that it is owned by an American concern who are not answerable to an Indian court and whose pitiful compensation offer is deemed adequate by Indian politicians and judges (later discovered to be 'friendly' to the company) who are themselves unaffected by the accident – such is a portrait in miniature (each passing day yields a million different ones) of neo-colonialism. Or look again at the glimpse of Nandigram provided above. The attempted acquisition of agricultural land and dispossession of the people was undertaken by the West Bengal state administration under the aegis of the British colonial Land Acquisition Act (Sanhati 2007). This archaic, centuries-old law is now used all over India to create technologically 'advanced', corporatized, 'Special Economic Zones' where normal rules of state protection and welfare are suspended (Banerjee et al. 2007, p. 1488). This is how the political and economic systems of neo-colonialism are etched onto the lives of billions of people and it is this era and the entire matrix of its material-cultural conditions that I will call postcolonial in this book.[1]

Contemporary India, then, is postcolonial in the sense that it is the site of an intensified exploitation (and as ever, struggle against this exploitation) by a globalized ruling class. And despite the recent, mostly post-1991 use of the term 'globalized', we should remember that this has been the signal condition of India since its gaining of formal independence in 1947. Even, and especially, those achievements hailed as triumphs of the independent nation, such as the 'green revolution' that led to massive increases in Indian crop yields in the 1960s and 1970s, usually turn out to be financed and engineered by the cartel drawn from

the ruling classes of Euro-north America and India for the protection of their interests (Shiva 1991). The short-termism and profit-driven motives of such 'achievements' end up doing substantial damage to the network of natural and cultural systems that I have been calling the environment. Once we have grasped this idea of postcolonial India as a globalized entity within a world system, it is impossible not to see that its condition speaks simultaneously at local and global, specific and general, levels. What is happening in India is also happening, has happened and will happen in the rest of Asia, Africa and Latin America. Since at the heart of both colonialism and neo-colonialism lies the historical fact of unfolding, expanding capital, India (and all the other 'new' postcolonies) can be seen as a part of a singular, but radically uneven, world.

The story of India is echoed in the general condition of the entire postcolonial world, but obviously it has its own specificities. Such local and regional specificities also clearly obtain in the case of other post-colonial zones, but I want to hold on to the implications of the more general conditions that these regions share, even as we focus on the case of India. Moreover, as we shall shortly see, since I am taking 'post-colonial' as being inextricable from the condition of global capital, my analyses should also be taken as referencing not a closed system, but an open and comparative framework that invites the placing of the details emerging from the postcolonial zones next to those from the zones of radical underdevelopment or uneven development that exist at the very heart of the Euro-north American 'core'. This is not to suggest that we wipe out all differences between them, and see Moscow and Mogadishu, or Mumbai and Kinshasa as interchangeable entities, but that we compare their cultures and environments in all their specificities and in doing so derive some understanding of the singular and uneven historical condition that is bestowed by capital on the world that it roams.

Why postcolonial English literature?

Indian English literature, like Indian English language, represents only a fraction of the total cultural activity and production of the country. Moreover, in the light of what I have just said about the sense in which I will be using 'postcolonial' in this book, and in view of the role played by the Anglophone culture industry in 'globalization' and neo-colonialism, my decision to focus on contemporary Indian writing in English may need some explanation. There is no doubt that at a sociological level, Indian English literature (and, especially, those forms like

the Indian English novel that are most visible in the global cultural system) is a notable component of what Graham Huggan calls the 'postcolonial exotic' or a 'global commodification of cultural difference' (2001, p. vii). As Huggan notes, the publishing and marketing, the very presentation of writers such as the ones we will look at in Chapters 4 through 7 as global spectacles, result in the formation of a kind of cultural capital that valorizes institutional academic postcolonial studies in the universities of Europe and north America. At the same time it converts marginality and opposition into valuable intellectual commodities (Huggan 2001, p. viii). In this contemporary process of exoticization – that is, the production, estrangement and domestication of people, objects, places as 'others' – and the consumption of the exotic, there are clearly 'significant continuities between older forms of imperial exoticist representation and some of their more recent, allegedly postcolonial counterparts' (Huggan 2001, p. 16). According to this line of thinking, the writers we will look at are indeed 'postcolonial', and are so in the sense that they occupy a privileged cultural position in the globalized market regime of neo-colonialism and that they help in the extension and regulation of this regime which is itself an intensified form of older colonial and imperial capitalist formations. In the chapters on Arundhati Roy, Amitav Ghosh, Indra Sinha and Ruchir Joshi, I note the phenomena of their global currency that take the shape of prestigious literary prizes and international reviews – and no doubt much more can be made of the entrenchment of their works in the canon of academic postcolonial studies (albeit in an uneven manner), the publication and circulation histories of their works, and indeed, the strategic global privilege and capital accrued by critical studies of their works, such as this book and the many other books and articles I cite here. No doubt it would also be possible to show how the purportedly oppositional and radical contents of their literary works make these, as Huggan shows, valuable and marketable to the very regime to which they are opposed. Protest sells. Marginality is chic. The consumption of these works helps to maintain a system of exploitation that was inaugurated by European colonialism and imperialism more than five hundred years ago.

Yet, as Huggan himself notes, one of the interesting things about postcolonial writers (and other cultural workers) is that they find a way of registering an artistic critique of their own sociological positions in their works. Themselves purveyors of eminently marketable exotic products and exoticized agents, they can make exoticism bite back – 'in a postcolonial context, exoticism is effectively *repoliticised,* redeployed both to unsettle metropolitan expectations of cultural otherness and

to effect a grounded critique of differential relations of power' (2001, pp. ix–x). I want to pay special attention to the place in which Huggan locates this unsettling redeployment – the styles and forms mobilized by these writers and artists:

> they have also succeeded in sustaining a *critique* of exoticism in their work. This critique is located in each case in forms of cultivated exhibitionism: the deliberately exaggerated hawking of Oriental(ist) wares by a narcissistic narrator (Rushdie); the consciously melodramatic combination of Indian romance and political intrigue (Seth); the overwrought staging of a tragic tale of illicit cross-caste love (Roy).
>
> (2001, p. xi)

The 'cultivated exhibitionism' that Huggan finds in the most prominent and successful postcolonial writers is precisely a formal and stylistic quality that disturbs the norms of the very exoticism via which they are placed and consumed in the contemporary global market. In much of our discussion of the writers here, I want to extend and refine Huggan's insights. I want to pay at least as much attention to the styles and forms of the postcolonial novels as to their themes and contents, because I feel that much of their literary specificity – and what we may call their cultural politics – resides therein, in opposition to their mode of circulation and their sociological positions. That is to say, despite their obvious participation in the entrenchment of a global neo-colonial or postcolonial regime, contemporary Indian writing in English offers a searching critique of that regime (and by extension of itself) through its *literary* specificity and singularity. And I want to suggest that what I have called 'postcolonial environments' has an important formative relationship with this literary singularity of the contemporary Indian novel in English. Undoubtedly, literatures written in other Indian languages perform the same kind of formal and stylistic moves. But their linguistic specificities give them a different position in the circuits of the global neo-colonial cultural market. The rate at which they are co-opted within the regime of exoticization is different from – I am tempted to say slower than – their English language counterparts. This alone makes Indian English literature an appropriate field of investigation for me – the contradiction, as well as the dialectical relationship, between its life in the global market and its formal and stylistic manoeuvres perfectly capturing the rhythm of the lived experience of contemporary global existence.

This question of the literary singularity of contemporary Indian writing in English needs to be borne in mind when we look at the works of our writers. In his careful description of what the 'literariness' of literature is made of, Derek Attridge identifies three interrelated factors – invention, singularity and alterity (2004, p. 2). There are several problems with Attridge's formulations, not least the undifferentiated and uncritical way in which he conceives of 'western civilization' and 'western art', but if we put these aside for the moment, his attention to the specificity of the literary usefully illustrates the way in which I will try and approach these questions in the context of contemporary Indian literature. For Attridge, literary invention occurs when a text significantly departs from the norms of its cultural field or matrix in such a way that it changes the very contours of the field in question (Attridge calls this mode of departure 'originality'). This inventive act then sets off a chain of developments, parodies and challenges (2004, p. 42). The 'new deployment of [artistic] materials' that such an act of literary invention performs in turn renders it as an uncontainable – or at best only partially containable – 'other' in its own cultural field. This quality of 'otherness' is what Attridge calls its alterity (2004, pp. 46–9). This 'otherness' or alterity of literature is precisely *not* the sense in which the term is used by Huggan, because it is not amenable to the domesticating gesture of exoticism, resists commodification, and always exists as a disruptive excess in relation to existing cultural norms. It is this inventive alterity that constitutes the singularity of literature: 'A configuration of general properties that, in constituting the entity (as it exists in a particular time and place), go beyond the possibilities pre-programmed by a culture's norms with which its members are familiar and through which most cultural products are understood' (2004, p. 63).

One of my basic assumptions here has been that despite their obvious commodification as cultural objects in the contemporary global market, the 'literariness' of Indian literature in English ought to interest us because of the way in which its inventiveness, alterity and singularity offer a critique of its own status as desirable commodity. And it does so by registering environment simultaneously at the levels of theme and form. The attractively produced covers, photographs, blurbs and prizes that accompany the novel of an Arundhati Roy may at one level work to reduce the purported radicalism of the story to little more than a pleasurable frisson for a privileged global audience. But at another level, the irreducible literariness of the novel – the way in which it performs its story – introduces a series of disturbances – what Attridge calls 'a germ, a

foreign body' – into the everyday lives of that audience, which disrupts the cultural and ideological status quo.

While the idea of the thematic presence of environment in a novel is relatively easy to understand, what do I mean when I talk of its formal and stylistic presence, which after all, if Huggan and Attridge are correct, signal its 'literariness'? For it should be evident by now that what Huggan calls the 'cultivated exhibitionism' of postcolonial literature is also its literary singularity. And like Huggan, Attridge locates the style and form of literature as being the site where this singularity takes shape (2004, p. 11). If literary singularity aims for radical difference from cultural norms, the linguistic expanse of literary texts provides the perfect opportunity, indeed the compulsion, to achieve that difference:

> As we move up the scale from the smallest units of language to larger and larger ones, the opportunities for deviation from exiting norms increase while the affront to the interpreting mind produced by deviation decreases … entire texts offer boundless opportunities for innovation, requiring marked deviations from generic conventions to produce strong effects.
>
> (Attridge 2004, p. 58)

It is no accident that so many reviews of the literature that we will look at in this book register this disturbance in endless discussions and debates – sometimes in distinctly uncomplimentary tones – of forms, styles and genres. Frequently reviews complain about excess, about exhibitionism, of needless flamboyance that detracts from the story. Against these assertions, I will argue that it is precisely these excesses and exhibitionisms that constitute the literariness of the literature, that prevent it from being wholly and utterly assimilated into the cultural logic of the neo-colonial global market. As Attridge notes, one of the features of literary fiction is its performance of its own fictionality – 'occurring as the experience of an event or a series of events whereby the characters and occurrences being referred to are in fact, and without this fact being disguised, brought into being by language' (2004, p. 96). Time after time we will encounter our novels thus performing (or exhibiting) their own novelistic or literary nature for us. This ensures that the story we are reading – about the necessarily interlinked devastation of the humans, non-humans, soil, water, air and crops of postcolonial India – is experienced as a performance of the story; a disturbing experience that prevents any easy consumption of the story as merely another simple pleasure, a supping of the more exotic products of the world.

But besides being in the story, does environment also contribute to the story's own performance?

Here, we turn to the specific way in which the novels we will look at perform their fictionality, for it is in the cultural resources they draw upon to do so that the relationship between environment and cultural forms reveals itself. After my emphasis on the 'literariness' of postcolonial Indian writing in English, it may come as a surprise that I devote so much space in my discussions to non-literary artistic forms and the ways in which literary texts are able to mobilize these as artistic resources. It is here that I extend and depart from Attridge's arguments, in so far as his notions of literary singularity operate mostly within the realm of literature itself. Although he scrupulously and fairly says 'it is only by an artificial and arbitrary act of separation that the qualities of the literary can be discussed … in isolation from related qualities in other art-forms' (p. 3), it is difficult not to come away from Attridge's book with the impression that the decisive alteration of the 'cultural matrix' that literature achieves is largely a matter internal to the 'event' of literature. Clearly, the literary singularity of the novels we will consider depends on their drawing on, re-workings of, and deviations from other literary forms, styles, genres and subjects – quite frequently those written in other Indian languages. But unlike Attridge, I have chosen to focus on the quite remarkable emphasis that these novels place on other art forms, such as dance, theatre, music and photography, both as crucial elements in their stories and as resources which are utilized to mould and shape their distinctive literariness. Why is this? I think it is no accident that each of the novels in question exaggeratedly performs its own fictionality by borrowing idioms, rhythms and cadences from allied art forms that constitute the cultural matrix of contemporary India at the same time as they assign these forms strategic thematic positions in their stories (in fact, I would say that it would not be possible for works of Indian, or any literature, to constitute their own singularities without this symbiotic and mobile relationship with the non-literary forms that surround them). I would say that it is precisely a postcolonial environment that enables, even compels, these novels to use the kind of non-literary artistic resources – folk-theatre, dance-dramas, classical music, even photography – to constitute their innovative singularity. These are available to our novelists as a result of a particular configuration of the environment they attempt to inhabit, a configuration shaped by forces that we have named as capitalism and colonialism. That is to say, it is only in the specifically postcolonial environment that non-literary artistic forms such as these become available as resources for literatures

in the task of moulding literary singularity, and this is so because of the extreme unevenness of capitalist development in the postcolony which renders the environment too, radically uneven.

Why uneven environments?

A conceptual thread that runs through and binds together my understanding of the terms 'postcolonial', 'environment' and 'literary singularity' is that of 'uneven development'. I mentioned earlier that I take 'postcolonial' to be the condition of a particular stage in the global unfolding of historical capital. But what also needs to be said is that since it has long been understood that the globalization of capital is marked by the rhythm of a radical unevenness, we need to understand how 'postcolonial' or especially, postcolonial environments, constitute a particular expression of this rhythm, for it has profound and irreversible effects on the materiality of the world that our writers inhabit, reflect upon and in which they intervene with their writing.

The basic feature of capitalism as a system, as Marx and Engels remarked long ago, is its tendency to overaccumulate and concentrate capital in one zone at the same time as it empties another of it. And as David Harvey suggests, this has always been a profoundly spatial and geographical affair (2000, p. 23). The rhythm of overaccumulation and underdevelopment means that capitalism is compelled to reorganize space, to expand geographically, and to insert itself unevenly across the globe. In other words, the economic dynamics of capital is etched onto the political, cultural, material and ecological fabric of our world. Since it has been my contention that it is precisely this network of politics, culture, ecology, physical space and non-human matter that we should understand as 'environment', there is no way for us to understand it without our engagement with the notion of the uneven unfolding of historical capital. We should also note, with Harvey, that destructiveness lies at the heart of this core, contradictory dynamic of capital:

> Capitalism is under the impulsion to eliminate all spatial barriers … but it can do so only through the production of fixed space. Capitalism thereby produces a geographical landscape … appropriate to its own dynamic of accumulation at a particular moment of its history, only to have to destroy and rebuild the geographical landscape to accommodate accumulation at a later date.
>
> (2000, p. 59)

Again and again, the novels that we will be considering here zone in on the twin features of uneven development and rampant destruction that mark the environment of contemporary India.

If, however, uneven development is a general condition of historical capital, what is its *particular* conceptual relevance for colonial and postcolonial conditions? At one level, the capitalist compulsion towards geographical expansion means that from the very beginning, its development was 'connected to the discovery of America … and the opening up of trade with the colonies and with the East Indian and Chinese markets' (Harvey 2000, p. 24). As Lenin observed, capitalism grew into a 'world system' only on the back of colonial oppression and 'financial strangulation of the overwhelming majority of the population of the world by a handful of "advanced" countries' (1947, p. 646). Before Lenin, Engels saw colonization as a direct consequence of a decisive shift in the rate of accumulation of capital after 1866 which made the colonies 'a pure appendage of the stock exchange, in whose interest the European powers divided up Africa a few years ago' (Marx 1991, p. 1047).

Lenin developed Engels's suggestion about the chronology of the intertwined development of global capitalism and colonialism into a general theory of imperialism. He saw pre-1860s colonialism as the (violent) opening up of foreign territories for the export of goods in the interest of 'free trade'. After the 1860s, however, the dominant nature of capitalism changed from industrial to financial, and its mode from 'free trade' to a monopoly of huge cartels (1947, p. 669). These changes led to concomitant changes in the nature of colonialism, which now passes into what Lenin calls imperialism, 'the monopoly stage of capitalism' (1947, p. 708). It is crucial to note that while for Lenin the colonies exist primarily as zones from which raw materials and cheap labour are extracted, they are also zones into which overaccumulated excess capital pooled in the imperialist Euro-north American metropolises are injected. In other words, the colonies are caught up in the broader process of uneven capitalist development, but this process occurs in a more exaggerated form than in the Euro-north American zone because the utterly disenfranchised peoples inhabiting politically subservient and militarily occupied areas are unable to check either the extreme rate at which their labour and raw materials are extracted or the extreme rate at which foreign capital pools in certain areas at the expense of others. Thus, the colonies embody the open secret that the Euro-north American bourgeoisie are compelled, to an extent, to conceal at home – 'that wage labor [sic] and capital are both based on the forcible separation of the

laborer from control over means of production' (Harvey 2000, p. 28). This is the specific peculiarity of the colonies in the uneven development of global capital.

If imperialism is a stage of monopoly finance capital that has divided up the world, then what we have been calling 'postcolonial' becomes the name of an even more intense form of imperialism where the globalized, cartelized, ruling classes continue an indirect control of the colonies through local intermediaries and *compradors*. 'Postcolonial environments' then describe the entire network of human and non-human material existence that is marked by the particular dynamics of historical capital at a specific stage and location. This being so, let us turn to the question of the relationship between this uneven postcolonial environment and its literary and non-literary cultures.

In reading novels alongside and to some extent through other cultural forms, such as folk-theatre, dance-drama and classical music, as I remarked above, we are examining a relationship that is specifically 'postcolonial'. Our discussion of historical unevenness should now enable us to expand on what this means. The colonies, in both their older classical forms and their contemporary 'new' or 'postcolonial' forms, are marked by the extremes of the rate of accumulation of foreign capital and extraction of resources and cheap labour. Their uneven formation is at the same time more compressed in time and more spatially polarized than that of colonizing states as a result of their political and military dependence on the latter. This radical unevenness has direct implications for cultural forms, as was remarked by Leon Trotsky in his history of the Russian Revolution.

Trotsky's text is a polemical tract, not a cultural theoretical one, and some of the terms he employs, such as 'backward' and 'advanced', should be taken strictly in their political and economic contexts. But still, as I will argue in Chapter 3, his brief remarks about the cultural consequences of uneven development open the possibilities for reflection on the literary cultures of postcolonial societies where the swing between development and underdevelopment is most extreme. Since I discuss this at more length later on, I will only sketch the outline of Trotsky's arguments here. As historical capital globalizes itself, its unevenness also takes cultural forms. A zone or a country that is 'backward' in terms of its capital accumulation assimilates the cultural wealth of those that are more 'advanced', but not in a blind, imitative fashion (Trotsky 1977, pp. 26–7). Rather, it amalgamates or combines these 'advanced' cultural forms with those 'archaic' forms that exist around it, producing extreme stylistic unevenness (Trotsky 1977, p. 27).

Trotsky is focused primarily on the peculiarities of Russian culture, but if the postcolonial zones and countries are marked by still more extreme cases of uneven development, what Trotsky calls the historical laws of cultural formations should apply to them as well, albeit in a more extreme fashion. In fact, the numerous literary and non-literary texts about contemporary India that we will look at here provide ample testimony to this process. On the one hand they talk about the wildly disparate ways of living in India, from stone-age hunter-gathering to space-age technological; on the other, they comment on the ways in which Indian cultural forms are marked by their stylistic excess, peculiarity and hybridity. My contention is that it is in these stylistic and formal peculiarities and excesses that we see the working out of Trotsky's insights about cultural combination and uneven development. Thus are created amalgamated or combined cultural forms where novels and folk-theatre, poetry and classical music are drawn together to embody an extreme historical condition – that of the radically uneven environment of advanced or late capitalism.

The basic assumption behind this explanatory framework is simple enough. Each historical mode of production and consumption produces a range of appropriate cultural forms – hunting and gathering has song cycles and paintings; pre-capitalist agrarian societies produce epic poem cycles and folk-theatre; capitalist agrarian societies produce certain styles of poetry and prose, and in its more advanced stages, the early novel form and so on. The point is that while these forms may occupy subordinate or dominant positions, they usually coexist (albeit to a stronger or weaker degree) within the field of culture, which has clear links with the political and economic fields, but cannot be reduced to them. In other words, a society or country shifting from being predominantly rural agrarian to predominantly urban industrial does not undergo the extinction or total eclipsing of epic poetry or certain kinds of religious folk-theatre performances, but there is a relative marginalization of these and a simultaneous adoption of some of their idioms and styles into new forms, such as novels and lyric poetry, that now become dominant. In a postcolony such as India, where hugely diverse modes of production and consumption and the cultural forms appropriate to each jostle together as a result of the uneven and extreme rate at which capitalism has inserted itself, what we have in the field of culture is the production of an extreme style that fuses novels, not just with other literary forms, but with other cultural forms such as folk-theatre and classical music. Thus, this cultural field is a specific feature of what I have been calling a postcolonial environment, the signal mark of which is radical unevenness.

Why 'eco' and 'poco' literary theories?

In the first three chapters below, I approach the question of the culture of postcolonial environments by discussing some lineages of the political, philosophical and literary/cultural theories of the schools of criticism that have come to be known as eco-/environmental and postcolonial ('eco', 'poco'). This is to acknowledge the path-breaking works of thinkers, activists and scholars who have, for the past five decades or so, asked searching questions about the relationships between modern capitalism, environment, colonialism and imperialism, and cultures. It would be impossible to conceive of the centrality of the issue of the relationship of environment to capitalism without engaging with Aldo Leopold's lyrical but angry evocation of the north American countryside, or without Raymond Williams's equally moving and sustained look at the relationship between British urban and rural spaces. Again, it would not be possible to think of postcolonial environments without the inspired cadences of Aime Cesaire's denunciation of colonialism's destruction of the entire material fabric of Africa, Asia and Latin America; nor would it be possible to think of the cultures of this environment without Edward Said's analysis of Euro-north American representations of a devastated Middle East.

Yet one of my basic contentions is that hitherto there has been a surprising lack of sustained exchange between eco-/environmental and postcolonial positions on the central questions of the cultures of postcolonial (or more generally, modern and contemporary) environments. There have been, of course, pioneering overtures made by eco-/environmentalists and postcolonialists towards each other, and in Chapter 2, I provide a brief account of these. And I by no means want to suggest that eco-/environmentalism and postcolonialism are monolithic schools of thought. Both Chapters 1 and 2 sum up the various trends and phases of the two critical perspectives, and note the tussles between 'deep' and 'social' ecology on the one hand, and 'textualist'/'culturalist' and materialist postcolonialism on the other. At numerous points, the various trends and phases of eco-/environmental and postcolonial positions quite consciously energize themselves by engaging with and borrowing concepts and ideas from each other. Still, considering that both positions are fundamentally concerned with the environments and cultures of capitalist modernity, it seems to me there has been nothing like the degree and intensity of cross-fertilization that they potentially offer each other and in many ways my plea that they do so is the core impulse of this book.

If pushed to summarize the reasons for the proposed cross-fertilization between eco-/environmental and postcolonial criticism, I would once have said (no doubt glibly and clumsily) that eco-/environmentalism should be able to materialize postcolonialism, while postcolonialism should be able to historicize eco-/environmentalism. With its presumed focus on the complex and diverse relationships between soil, water, plants, animals, air, humans and their various kinds of labour, eco-/environmental criticism can inject a much-needed materialist strain into postcolonial critical thinking; conversely, with its attention to the broad patterns of the emergence and consequences of modern colonialism and imperialism, postcolonial theories should be able to offer eco-/environmental positions a broad and flexible historical framework within which to locate the specific dynamics of the various agents that constitute the environment. But of course, the assumed separation of materialist and historicist approaches (one supposedly the feature of eco-/environmentalist, the other, supposedly of postcolonial critical perspectives) is not only theoretically insufficient but also exemplifies the inherent problems that have prevented more sustained exchange between the two positions.

To put it plainly – although as I show in Chapter 3 both eco-/environmental and postcolonial perspectives have regularly engaged with materialist philosophical and aesthetic positions – neither has been in any sense consistently historical-materialist. Throughout this book, I have tried to ask what it would mean to bring a historical-materialist method to the reading of the literary cultures of postcolonial environments. I have also tried to argue for the benefits of such a move. One obvious benefit has to do with the methodological ability to hold the particular and the general, the local, regional and global levels, within the same analytical move. This is emphatically not a matter of critical hubris, but a very simple response to what the literature we will be looking at asks us to do. Again and again, the novels we will be looking at will demand, through their literary singularity, that we reflect on and experience at the same time the minute details of postcolonial environments and the major sweeps and currents of their entangled global histories. A historical materialism that enables us to respond to and analyse the allure of their literary form and content seems to me to be an appropriate pathway through which to approach the presence of postcolonial environments. Writing about the necessity of an interpretative method keyed to our contemporary era, David Harvey has called for a 'historical-geographical materialism' (2000, p. 15). What Harvey calls 'historical-geographical materialism', I name

'eco-materialist aesthetics' in Chapter 3. I share Harvey's conviction that it is impossible to understand history and geography, nature and culture, without acknowledging their mutual interpenetration. But since I have understood 'environment' as being the symbiotic network of the entire human and non-human fields of existence, I have collapsed the potentially distinct terms 'history' and 'geography' into 'eco-'. Further, since I mobilize this historical-materialist concept of the environment in order to read literary cultures from a particular stage in history, I have here raised the issue of aesthetics. After outlining the lineage and genesis of this method or perspective, I have tried to test it out through consecutive readings of four literary texts and a number of non-literary cultural forms that cluster around them in Chapters 4 through 7. It is here that the uses, limits and fallibilities of the methods and theories I outline in the previous three chapters will be tested out.

1
From Earth Day to Earth Summits: Trajectories and Debates

'Memento Mori to the Earth'

In 1961, the Sierra Club, an increasingly influential organization advocating conservation of the north American wilderness and its wildlife, published a lavishly produced volume, aptly called *Wilderness*. The book opened with a series of sumptuous black-and-white photographs of canyons, deserts and woodlands by Philip Hyder – complete with text in large font urging the reader, presumed to be worn out by civilization, to seek out and commune with the wild places in order to be healed. In his introduction, the editor, David Brower, warned that humans were in the late autumn of exploiting the wilderness and it was imperative to 'hold out the reserves that will see us through the winter' (1961, p. iii). In an essay in the same volume, William Douglas proposed to raise funds to send sceptical Americans to the Middle East, an area of the world where he held that man had 'placed a curse … by reason of his disregard of conservation' (p. 14). There they could witness first-hand the dangers of making arrogant war on nature. John Saylor, a White House representative charged with establishing the eco-friendly credentials of the US government, made a spirited defence of the recent Wilderness Bill by outlining the intrinsic value of 'unspoilt' nature – that it provided solitude, peace, a sense of remoteness, adventure and (an increasingly fragile) primeval beauty to modern man. (pp. 150–1). *Wilderness* brought together some of the key ideas that would come to dominate environmental debates in north America and Europe over the subsequent decades – that 'nature' was extrinsic to and threatened by modern human civilization, especially by modern urban life (Hyde's beautiful photographs carefully exclude all obvious signs of human existence from their frames); that north America, and to some extent, western Europe

could take the lead in preserving nature (in contrast to the 'cursed' places of the earth, such as the 'Middle East', which were exemplary sites of human failure); that preservation of nature was important because it provided balm for the spiritual wounds of modern humankind. Indeed, on emotionally charged public occasions such as the hugely successful 'Earth Day' held all across the USA in 1970, the power of these ideas became visible. *Time Magazine* described the event as having aspects of a 'secular, almost pagan holiday' and yet noted its solemnity – 'it touched the American imagination with a *memento mori*, a vision as primitive as trilobites and novel as the idea of a windless, uninhabited earth orbiting on' ('A Memento Mori to the Earth', *Time Magazine* 1970). This paradoxical combination of celebration and an apocalyptic imaginary captured the essential contradiction that ran through the first Earth Day – that despite the general concern about the environment there was no settled sense of what environmentalism was or ought to be. *Time* noted that some 'radicals' thought that the whole thing was engineered by US senators to distract the public from the more pressing issues of the Vietnam War and racism. Others observed that 'Earth Day' coincided with Lenin's birthday and muttered darkly that it was a communist conspiracy. A Harris poll indicated that 54 per cent of Americans were willing to pay more taxes to control environmental pollution, but the Interior Secretary Walter Hickel chose Earth Day to announce the building of a hot oil pipeline from Prudhoe Bay to Valdez in Alaska, thereby endangering the ecosystem of an area of the Alaskan tundra. Despite this, Gaylord Nelson, the US senator who had been one of the biggest movers behind the event announced the day to be a turning point in American history; the day when the frontier ethic of expansive plunder was (hopefully) replaced by a collective realization of the fact that 'even urbanized, affluent, mobile societies are interdependent with the fragile, life-sustaining systems of the air, the water, the land' (ibid.)

Was the environmentalism of Earth Day an effort to spread the message of relationality – that everything and everyone was interconnected? If so, how did the Sierra Club's vision of preserving pristine nature shorn of all humanity fit into this idea? How was the conservationist ethic to be squared with the developmental imperative that oversaw the building of oil pipelines in Alaska and oil refineries in Honolulu? Would the US government advocate a decrease in national prosperity in order to preserve nature? Issues such as these seem not immediately to have troubled senator Nelson, who later recalled that the genesis of Earth Day lay in the 'national conservation tours' that he persuaded President John F. Kennedy to embark on in September 1963.

He also suggested that the model of Earth Day activism was adapted from the anti-Vietnam War 'teach-ins' that started on US campuses in 1969 (Nelson 1997).

In fact, much of this unsettling and contradictory mixture of apparently radical and conservative attitudes to the environment was already present in one of the founding texts of modern Euro-north American environmentalism – Aldo Leopold's *A Sand County Almanac* (Leopold 1987). Published in 1949, Leopold's book has been enshrined as one of the most influential examples of twentieth-century American nature writing. In his essays in the *Almanac* Leopold coruscates the prevailing ideas about conservation. Calling the modern conservationist a hunter, Leopold shows that his zeal is fired by the selfish desire to possess and consume: 'Because the wild things he hunts for have eluded his grasp, and he hopes by some necromancy of laws, appropriations, regional plans, reorganization of departments, or other forms of mass-wishing to make them stay put' (p. 167).

Leopold sees this faux-conservationism as affirming rather than disputing the basics of contemporary capitalism. The physical scarcity of the wilderness itself turned it into a valuable commodity through the nexus of advertisement and promotion, thereby ensuring its final disappearance (p. 172). This is the trophy that the conservationist now hunts, for 'He is the motorized ant who swarms the continent before learning to see his own back yard, who consumes but never creates outdoor satisfactions' (p. 176).

What does Leopold offer in the way of an alternative to this doomed conservationism? The figure of the great landowning farmer-pioneer who is at the heart of north America's frontier mythologies; the same mythologies with their cherished ethos of plunder that Gaylord Nelson would hold responsible for the vanishing wilderness. 'There are two spiritual dangers in not owning a farm', Leopold writes, 'One is the danger of supposing that breakfast comes from the grocery, and the other that heat comes from the furnace' (p. 6). Accordingly, it is on his Wisconsin farm, bought from the county, that he tries to rebuild, with shovel and axe, what humanity is losing elsewhere: 'to seek and still find – our meat from God'. Without question, Leopold combines the scientist's knowledge of the environment with the farmer's skills and the writer's eye and language. Yet as a model of countercultural existence the ideal of the heroic solitary pioneer communing through non-mechanized labour with divine nature comes freighted with significant problems. For example, while it is possible for Leopold, a successful professor at a

US university, to buy a disused farm attached to a significant chunk of land and to reinvent himself as, in the words of Robert Finch, the rural sage, not many people can command the resources to achieve such downscaling.

Leopold's writing is shot through with sadness and anger at lesser farmers who have opted out of his recommended style of natural communion. In a virtuoso essay in which he reconstructs the human history of the region by dating the rings on the bark of an oak tree, he imagines his predecessor, a bootlegger, 'who hated this farm, skinned it of residual fertility, burned its farmhouse, threw it back into the lap of the County … and then disappeared among the landless anonymities of the Great Depression' (p. 9). But what forced a man living on the margins of society to abandon his farm and join the dispossessed millions? Did his lease run out? Or perhaps he could no longer afford to run the place? Leopold does not know, or care. By this act of abandoning nature, as Leopold sees it, the nameless predecessor has also forfeited the right to be understood, explained, perhaps sympathized with. Leopold is annoyed with a bus full of chattering farmers – all they can talk about is 'baseball, taxes, sons-in-laws, movies, motors, and funerals'. Not once do they look at the heaving groundswell of Illinois, and they appear to be completely ignorant of the plants and fauna of the state. To him, these are the hollow men of modernity, colonized by the virus of the marketplace. Yet, it is these men who work on the fields of corn, clover and oats that Leopold gazes at out of the window of his bus. Is he so sure that the men do not care about the land they own simply because they (at least temporarily) are not reflecting on it in eloquent language? We do not know. They have failed to appreciate the beauty and prehistoric nobility of the cranes and the blooming of the *Silphium* – that is enough to condemn them as modern automatons.

A Sand County Almanac, ultimately, is suffused with Leopold's sad admission that the solitary pioneer-sage and his way of life can never make anything more than a negligible difference to the environmental predicament. His plea for conservation is for 'some tag-ends of wilderness, as museum pieces, for the edification of those who may one day wish to see, feel, or study the origins of cultural inheritance' (p. 188). Although he famously calls for a 'land ethic' that will enlarge the boundaries of a community to include 'soils, plants, and animals, or collectively: the land', he also concedes: 'A land ethic of course cannot prevent the alteration, management, and use of these "resources", but it does affirm their right to continued existence, and, at least in spots, their continued existence in a

natural state' (p. 204). And these spots, one presumes, will be reserved for the rural sages of our times, in lyrical and splendid harmony with sublime nature.

The contradictions inherent in the visions of Leopold, the Sierra Club and the organizers of Earth Day were absorbed by the American and European 'deep ecology' movement that formed in the early 1970s and whose conceptual positions were made clear in a series of essays written by figures such as Arne Naess, David Brower (also the moving spirit behind the Sierra Club), Robinson Jeffers, Barry Lopez and Warwick Fox. Naess, credited with coining the term 'deep ecology' in 1973, adapted his work in semantics to environmental studies and proposed a set of what he called radical paradigms in order to overturn conventional thinking about nature. Much of his thinking was adapted from Leopold's, but Naess extrapolated some key ideas from Leopold's north American context and projected them onto the global situation as he saw it. For example, Leopold's criticism of industrial capitalism and growth were applied by Naess to interpret the condition of the whole world:

> We have 'progressed' to the point where the objectives of the good life must be considered threatening; we are intricately implicated in a system which guarantees short-term well-being in a small part of the world through destructive increases in material affluence. The privileges are regionally reserved because a similar increase of affluence in Africa, Asia or South America is not intended and would hasten the advent of an environmental Armageddon.
>
> (1989, p. 25)

Naess's 'deep ecology' proposed overturning the dire state of things by advocating the development of an awareness of a total, relational field of existence, within which all living and non-living forms were connected to each other. On the basis of this proposition, he drew up a seven-point programme, prominent among which were propositions such as – 'the flourishing of human and non-human life … is independent of the usefulness these may have for narrow human purposes'; and 'the flourishing of human life and cultures is compatible with a substantial decrease of human population. The flourishing of human life requires such a decrease' (p. 29). In essence, Naess's 'deep ecology' is a philosophy programmed systematically to change the reflexive anthropocentric position held by human beings in regard to the environment in particular, and to existence in general. It is built upon Leopold's

'land ethic' and re-tooled for a generalized application to the human condition worldwide. But supposing that human beings achieve such a state of consciousness, how are they to practise what Naess preaches in his final proposition – 'those who subscribe to the foregoing points have an obligation directly or indirectly to participate in the attempt to implement the necessary changes'? Here 'deep ecology' falls back on the Leopoldian model of the heroic pioneer-farmer existing in small, isolated 'self-regulating' communities – aptly called the 'minority tradition' by Bill Devall (Devall and Sessions 1985, p. 19). If there is an obvious disjunction between Naess's global ambitions, and the minority communities that are supposed to sustain those ambitions, that disjunction is not the only one in the 'deep ecological' vision.

Leopold and Naess both start from a criticism of modern capitalism – that in Europe and north America its expansive drive had reached the stage where human existence was toxic for both humans and non-humans. Yet, the cures they suggest were to be applied in an undifferentiated manner to the whole world; this despite the fact, as Naess himself notes, that capital and modernity did not penetrate Asia, Africa and Latin America in the same way as it did north America and western Europe. Was the relationship between humans and the environment in these disparate areas of the world the same as that in north America and western Europe and to be cured by the same medicine? In short, can the condition of north America and Europe ever be used as shorthand for a global condition?

This kind of first-worldism has obvious imperialist precedents and clearly reflects the post-1945 global dispensation. But there are other equally troubling problems. At a philosophical level, there is the contradiction between advocating 'thinking like a mountain' – the abandonment or at least the radical dilution of anthropocentric thinking – and the benefits that one supposedly derives from that practice, the bettering of human quality of life. Anti-anthropocentrism seems to lead to an anthropocentric end. Further, 'deep ecology' assumed that it would be possible to change human thought patterns before changing human practice. Naess came up with his propositions in the belief that if humans could think beyond themselves, they would be inspired to act accordingly. This idealist position was derived from his work in semantics and communication in the 1950s, which assumed, as Rothenberg explains in his introduction to Naess's work: 'We come up with ideas, we release them to the world, but only if they can be grasped by others can they come to exist collectively and have weight. This is the essence of Naess's "relational thinking" – nothing exists apart' (1989, p. 6). But how do we come up with ideas? Where are they before we 'release them

to the world'? How do we know that the world plays no role in the birth of those ideas? Deep ecology's compromised anti-anthropocentrism and idealism fatally wounds its proposed reformatory practices.

In addition to first-worldism and idealism, 'deep ecology' also contains a deeply problematic conceptualization of environment itself. As Leopold's writings show, environment is usually conflated with nature, and in this way of thinking is often a particular vision of nature – the ever-shrinking wilderness. Moreover, almost by definition, this 'nature' has room only for the solitary or at best, the minority figure of the pioneer-poet-observer. The model of the relationship between humans and environment is thus almost always conceived of as a one-on-one affair. Far from being a radical departure from the norms of modern capitalism, this gesture, as Devall demonstrates, is deeply conservative (Devall and Sessions 1985, p. 21). It is conservative both because it sees 'nature' as something separate from and threatened by the human, the vestiges of which are to be conserved; and because its vision of solitary pioneer-poets or at best small communities of enlightened rural farmers offers versions of a bucolic utopia that are constantly subsumed by the actual force of historical capital. Further, this nature/culture dualism found at the core of deep ecology's conservationist thrust seems to dispute its own principle of relationality – if everything is indeed connected to everything else, to what extent is it possible to strain after a vision of nature emptied of humans (as wistfully captured by Hyder's lens)? How does one think about cities – the dominant human environment of modernity? Not only are the elements that build the fabric of a city 'natural' – water, space, matter – but urban configurations clearly have complex impacts on the non-human life forms with which they interface. The anti-urban bias of 'deep ecology' seems to allow no room for this kind of analysis. It was in response to such conceptual conundrums that a rival approach to the environment took shape alongside the 'deep ecological' currents of the 1960s and 1970s.

Odin's eye

In 1952, Murray Bookchin published 'The Problem of Chemicals in Food', where, as the title implies, he analysed the effects of chemicals used in fertilizers entering the human food chain. Over the next three decades, he continued his work on what he called the 'synthetic environment', and by the early 1980s he had arrived at a point at which he was able to theorize his findings, which he did in a book called *The Ecology of Freedom* (1982).[1] Bookchin's vision of the environment had much in common with those of the 'deep ecologists'. Like them, he agreed

that modern capitalist civilization posed an existential threat to human and non-human lives on the planet. A lover of Norse mythologies, he was fond of finding in these allegories of the contemporary condition. In modern science, which for Bookchin was the supreme expression of modern capitalism, he saw the predicament of the Promethean Norse god, Odin, who had to pay for wisdom by forfeiting one of his eyes: 'But science as we know it today is the fragmented one-sided vision of a one-eyed god, whose vantage point entails domination and antagonism, not coequality and harmony' (1982, p. 41). There is also a reflection of Aldo Leopold's critique of state-managed conservation in Bookchin. Bookchin saw these conservation efforts as being part of what he called 'environmentalism' – 'a mechanistic, instrumental outlook that sees nature as a passive habitat composed of "objects" such as animals, plants, minerals, and the like that must be serviceable for human use'. This, as he noted:

> does not question the most basic premise of the present society, notably, that humanity must dominate nature; rather, it seeks to facilitate that notion by developing techniques for diminishing the hazards caused by the reckless despoliation of the environment.
>
> (p. 21)

Further, like Leopold and Naess, Bookchin thought a change in human consciousness and sensibility to be the precondition to stopping or even reversing the present trajectory.

But unlike his 'deep ecological' counterparts, Bookchin did not propose that retreating into a rural, individualist ecotopia or practising Zen Buddhism would achieve this radical alteration of human consciousness. Indeed, nowhere in Bookchin do we find the ideal of 'pure nature' cleansed of a polluting human presence. Instead, he emphasized the irrefutable continuity between the human and the non-human, the natural and the cultural. The 'social ecological' outlook or ethic, as he called it, is convinced that:

> Since nature also includes human beings, the science must include humanity's role in the natural world – specifically, the character, form, and structure of humanity's relationship with other species and with the inorganic susbstrata of the biotic environment … As both worlds interact with each other through highly complex phases of evolution, it has become as important to speak of a social ecology as to speak of a natural ecology.
>
> (ibid.)

This determination to keep the human in the picture allows Bookchin to bring history within his interpretative range. History is 'as important as form and structure' because 'to a large extent, the history of the phenomenon is the phenomenon itself' and because 'at its inception, human history is largely natural history as well as social' (p. 34). It also demands the inclusion – indeed stresses the importance – of culture, of cities, literature, the arts, trade, in the thinking about environment, and thus avoids much of the fatal dualism of 'deep ecology'. Instead of the duality of nature and culture, Bookchin sees a dialectic between the two; instead of Leopold and Naess's intuitive oneness with environment, Bookchin proposes the development of a historicized and analytic connection (p. 39). His 'social ecology', is based on two scientifically testable phenomena – that organic evolution moves from simple to complex forms of life, and that any form of hierarchy is an obstacle to this movement. For Bookchin, modern capitalist civilization, by embedding hierarchy (social, economic, political, material) as a core organizational principle, has reversed the evolutionary direction of the great chain of being by moulding an environment where only a few simple forms of life can exist (p. 40). Thus, if 'social ecology' is critical of the direction that modern science and technology has taken, the criticism itself proposes a series of alternative, progressive routes through which human scientific and technological energies can flow.

Bookchin's work found echoes in that of a number of other contemporary thinkers. In Britain, working as a literary and cultural critic and from within a different philosophical tradition, Raymond Williams came to the same conclusions about the dialectical relationship between humans and nature, which he expanded most famously into an analysis of the iconography of rural and urban spaces in *The Country and the City* (1973). The general idea stated there went on to form the core of Williams's cultural theories as expressed in later works such as *Culture and Materialism* (first published in 1980): 'the idea of nature contains an extraordinary amount of human history. What is often being argued, it seems to me, in the idea of nature is the idea of man; and this not only generally, or in ultimate ways, but the idea of man in society, indeed the ideas of kinds of society' (2005, pp. 70–1). Williams shows the 'deep ecological' idea of a uncontaminated natural realm separate from the human as being neither radical nor contemporary, but as having its roots in the 'physical scientists and improvers' of the European Enlightenment (pp. 76–7). The ideal of the pioneer-farmer is

now shown as the projection of a social fantasy that is determined by social and material human realities:

> The impulse is understandable, but quite apart from its element of fantasy … it is a serious underestimate of the complexity of the problem … The point that has really to be made about the separation between man and nature which is characteristic of so many modern ideas is that – however hard this may be to express – the separation is a function of an increasing real interaction.
>
> (pp. 82–3)

For Williams, much more so than for Bookchin, it is the abstraction of human labour under modern and contemporary capitalism that leads to both the relative human alienation from nature and the projection of human social fantasies onto nature as a kind of emotional and psychologically compensatory gesture. Like Bookchin, Williams proposes that the first step in reversing this abstract mentality can only be achieved through analysis and awareness of the historical trajectory of evolution – simultaneously natural and cultural.

Historicizing cultural, economic, political and biological evolution enabled 'social ecology' to propose an alternative to the idealized 'deep' vision of redemptive rural existence on the margins of pure wilderness. Yet, neither Williams nor Bookchin seem to have been able entirely to transcend the first-worldism that had also marked the work of their 'deep' ecological counterparts. It was in the barricades, teach-ins and demonstrations of California, New York, Washington, London, Paris and Berlin that Bookchin found evidence of the crisis of modernity's baleful efforts to reverse the course of organic evolution. Williams's astute excavation of the cultural production of nature sweeps from Classical Greece to Edwardian England, but sees in this enough evidence to generalize about a world condition. Yet their steadfast insistence on historical analysis and on continuity between the human and the non-human enabled other scholars to extend the social ecological analysis beyond Europe/north America, and offer an incisive examination of the relationship between these western blocs and the rest of the world.

Drawing on the insights of Bookchin and Williams and those of a number of geographers such as David Harvey, Neil Smith and Mike Davis, not to mention insights offered by worldwide conflicts unleashed by the 'new world order', 'social ecology' began to offer more particularized global interpretations from the 1990s onward. In *The Chicago Gangster*

Theory of Life (1994), Andrew Ross continued Leopold and Bookchin's attack on modern 'conservationism' or 'environmentalism'. But he did so by showing how it is co-opted by the great transnational companies:

> Whatever use environmentalism has served as a discourse for explaining some of the North/South disparity between scarcity and abundance is now being undermined and assimilated into corporate logic by the post-Rio move to create a world environment market in the form of free-market solutions to the problem of absorbing, distributing, and exploiting environmental costs.
>
> (p. 127)

In a series of wide-ranging analyses taking in the first Gulf War, 'eco'-tourism in the Pacific islands and World Bank policies, Ross further shows how the governments of Europe and especially the United States use military and political power to back transnational companies and establish new forms of imperialism across a supposedly de-colonized world.

Ross's work showed that by the final decade of the twentieth century, studies, analyses and theories of the environment or ecology could no longer stay anchored to European or north American histories and realities. Modern capitalism's relationship with the environment now had to be understood through the histories of old and new imperialisms and colonialism that continue to be a crucial medium for the expression of environmental/ecological phenomena. Unsurprisingly, it was scholars from Asia, Africa and South America, the transcontinental span that came to be known as the 'global south', who led this revision in the conceptual framework of 'social ecology'. For Ramachandra Guha and Juan Martinez-Alier (1997) there are distinctive and material differences between the environments and environmentalism of the Euro-north American zones and that of the global south: differences determined by the disparity in the wealth of the people in these regions:

> If poverty arises, or is thought to arise, from unequal economic and ecological distribution, then we may expect that social movements against the rich will also be ecological movements … The illusion of continued economic growth is encouraged by the world's rich in order to maintain peace among the poor. But the truth is that unchecked economic growth leads to the exhaustion of resources and to pollution, and this harms the poor.
>
> (1997, p. 75)

From this condition, peculiar to the inhabitants of the global south, arise what Guha and Martinez-Alier call the 'environmentalism of the poor'. They make an attempt to distinguish it from the 'environmentalism of the affluent' in terms of both ideology and practice:

> The environmentalism of the poor originates as a clash over productive resources: a third kind of class conflict ... In Southern movements, issues of ecology are often interlinked with questions of human rights, ethnicity, and distributive justice. These struggles, of peasants, tribals and so on, are in a sense deeply conservative ... They are a defence of the locality and the local community against the nation. At the same time, the sharper edge to environmental conflict, and its close connections to subsistence and survival, have also prompted a thoroughgoing critique of consumerism and of uncontrolled economic development.
>
> (p. 18)

Crucially, it is not only poverty that marks the environment of the 'global south', but poverty of a special kind – one that has its roots in the modern history of colonialism and imperialism. This becomes evident in the testimonies of the peasants and tribal activists, who see their struggles as the continuation of the struggles waged by their ancestors against the European colonizers. In the Indian state of Karnataka, one such activist tells Guha:

> Our forefathers who fought to get rid of the foreign yoke thought that our country would become a land of milk and honey once the British were driven out. But now we see our rulers joining hands with the monopolists to take away basic resources like land, water and forest.
>
> (p. 15)

This popular insight into the continuing links between old and new forms of imperialism, colonialism and capitalism is further bolstered by a historical analysis of the contemporary 'global south'. Speaking of the current environmental and economic predicament of south Asia, David Arnold and Ramachandra Guha (1996) point out that the roots of this crisis can be found in the colonial order of things, where the area provided 'a primary source of raw materials and a site for state regulation on a scale massive enough to make the cherished Victorian notion of laissez-faire an ecological myth and an economic fantasy' (1996, p. 10). Guha and Martinez-Alier also clearly see in the current conservationist

environmentalism of north America and Europe a continuation of imperialist ideology:

> Specious nonsense about the equal rights of all species cannot hide the plain fact that green imperialists are possibly as dangerous and certainly more hypocritical than their economic or religious counterparts … The conservationist wants to 'protect the tiger (or whale) for posterity', yet expects *other* people to make the sacrifice.
>
> (1997, p. 107)

This postcolonial turn in 'social ecology' has clearly been vital to the expansion of the scope of the field and its ability to remain of continuing relevance to attempts to analyse and interpret the global condition. Yet, there are some major conceptual problems in Guha and other champions of the 'environmentalism of the poor'. The first striking thing is their undifferentiated concepts of global 'north' and 'south', which presuppose these areas as being uniformly rich or poor. Especially problematic is the location of class conflict only in the global south, and the concomitant designation of the 'global north' as 'post-materialist': as if the large-scale and endemic poverty of American inner cities and ghettoes, the Parisian *banlieus*, swathes of former industrial cities in Britain and the no-go areas of London, Nottingham and Manchester, the crumbling, swastika-daubed houses of eastern Germany and the bands of lupine orphaned children who live in Moscow's underground sewer works were not evidence enough of capitalism's tendency to create underdevelopment at its core. Similarly, to reduce the global 'south' to the realm of the poor is to overlook the cybercities of India and the Indian entrepreneurs who crowd to the top of the annual *Forbes*' rich-list; the Brazilians whose spending on cosmetic surgery is greater than the entire government budgets for their cities' water and electricity supplies; the Africans whose mansions are bordered with electric fences and patrolled by private mercenaries and guard dogs; and the Saudis and Chinese who fly to London and Paris for their weekend shopping just as the vast majority of their fellow citizens trudge to the local market for meagre food. In short, while invoking colonialism and imperialism through the idiom of maldistribution, poverty and wealth, Guha and other like-minded theorists seem to forget the essential feature of global capitalism – its tendency to develop pockets of extreme wealth and vast swathes of poverty *simultaneously* on local, national and global levels. Thus, they have no accounts for the 'northern environmentalism of the poor' – the struggles of Latino and Black

American communities against the housing, water and air pollution of their inner city districts; the British industrial workers' fight against asbestos poisoning; and the French agricultural workers' fight against intensively-reared poultry and other corporatized food production methods.

One other thing is noticeable about the proponents of 'environmentalism of the poor'. Guha, as we have seen, has spoken of a third kind of class-conflict and elsewhere has underlined the importance of moving away from the traditional Marxist modes of production analysis to a 'modes of resource-use' approach, because he believes that the former is not sufficiently materialist (Guha and Gadgil 1993, p. 12). What then does the latter consist of?

> The concept of modes of resource use extends the realm of production to include flora, fauna, water, and minerals … While complementing the mode of production framework, the mode of resource use scheme incorporates two additional dimensions. First, it examines whether one can identify characteristic ideologies that govern different modes. More importantly, it identifies the ecological impact of various modes.
>
> (p. 13)

Now, although Guha contends that this approach is a supplement to the analysis of the production process, it seems to me that resource use is in fact only another name for consumption, albeit a consumption of natural elements of flora, fauna and so on. The relationship between production and consumption is the very cornerstone of a Marxist analysis of capitalism, and at the very least, Guha here exaggerates the novelty of his theoretical proposition. Moreover, historians such as those working with Braudel's *longue-durée* approach have long since incorporated precisely what Guha claims his approach has achieved – the ecological impact of various processes of production and the production of ideology that accompanies this process. In their desire to be seen as proposing an updated or evolved Marxist position, Guha and other theorists might be overstating their differences with Marx and introducing potentially conflicting and confusing concepts.

Still, there is no doubt that the incorporation of the questions of colonialism and imperialism gives more bite to social ecology's ability to interpret the global condition. The rallying cry of 'social ecology' – 'No Nature without Social Justice' – is echoed in works as diverse as those of the scholars and activists associated with the environmental justice

movement and the string of incisive and glittering books produced by a historian such as Mike Davis, taking in everything from the ecological warfare waged against the rural dispossessed in California to the part played by the British colonial administration in engineering a series of nineteenth-century global famines and a vision of the future dominated by third-world slum cities. 'Social ecology's' attempts to offer a critical alternative to the 'deep ecological' approach continue to be, if not decisive, at least comprehensive.[2]

'The economic logic of toxic waste'

On 12 December 1991, a memo from the then president of the World Bank, Lawrence Summers, was leaked to the world press, causing outrage amongst ecologists and environmental activists of all varieties as well as the general public. Jose Lutzenburger, Brazil's Secretary for Environment, declared that Summers's reasoning was 'perfectly logical but totally insane', and the World Bank was forced first to dismiss the memo as an ironic joke, and then pin the blame on one of Summers's aides. Summers wrote three things in this memo – first, that 'the economic logic behind dumping a load of toxic waste in the lowest wage country is impeccable and we should face up to that'; second, that underpopulated countries, especially in Africa, had an under-polluted environment and could 'carry' large amounts of pollution and waste produced in the USA and Europe – all that was needed was to work out a cheap way to transport this waste; finally, that the demand for a clean environment for aesthetic and health reasons can only arise in an affluent society ('Lawrence Summers Memo' 1991).

Although the 'Summers memo' has since become a part of the folklore of 'Satan's bank' in environmentalist and human rights circles, it is not perverse to see in it expressions of some of their own concerns. Think of the Sierra Club and William Douglas's proposals that Americans should visit north Africa and the Middle East to witness the human capacity for destruction. All that the Summers memo does is to make Douglas's ideological assumptions explicit – that somewhere out there in the east, quite detached from 'us', dwell tribes of crazed poverty-stricken crowds who fight among themselves and wage war on their environment but whose very existence is useful to 'us' because we can dump our political and environmental toxicity on them, because frankly, they are beyond hope and anyway do not care. Again, Summers's final point is an exact echo of the 'environmentalism of affluence' that Guha and others identify as a feature of the 'global north'.

Indeed, the tensions and contradictions that we have seen in the debates between 'social' and 'deep' ecological circles are exactly reproduced in the global economic and political policy debates over the same period. The pull between north American eco-parochialism and global interventionism can be seen in the evolution of the 'Earth Day Network', which, on the one hand has mushroomed into 17,000 organizations in 174 countries, and on the other devotes most of its campaigning energies to US domestic political/environmental issues ('Earth Day Network's Mission Statement' 2007). The 1972 Club of Rome report on 'the predicament of mankind' stated that a critical point in worldwide population and economic growth had nearly been reached and that expansion must be stopped or reversed to achieve global equilibrium (Meadows et al. 1972, pp. 191–4). The report was fully aware that this limiting of growth would unequivocally benefit the 'global north' and worsen the poverty-related problems of the so-called developing countries:

> We unequivocally support the contention that a brake imposed on world demographic and economic growth spirals must not lead to a freezing of the status quo of economic development of the world's nations.
>
> If such a proposal were advanced by the rich nations, it would be taken as a final act of neocolonialism.
>
> (p. 194)

Yet, this warning appeared to contradict the undifferentiated conclusion about global population growth in the report – 'The greatest possible impediment to more equal distribution of the world's resources is population growth ... Equal sharing becomes social suicide if the average amount available per person is not enough to maintain life' (p. 178). Not a word here about the vastly disparate rates of global consumption as an obstacle to global equity!

Nor has this tension between 'northern' eco-parochialism and issues of global ecological equity lessened in more recent years. On the contrary, it seems to have increased with every major global summit. Chakravarthi Raghavan's (1990) analysis of the Brundtland report on 'sustainable development' and the 1986 Uruguay Round of the GATT (General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade) summit explains this trend:

> The basic premise behind the Uruguay Round, and the new GATT that would emerge out of it, is that left to themselves, private enterprise

> and Transnational Corporations (TNCs) function efficiently and for benefit of all. Thus governments' power to intervene and regulate needs to be curbed.
>
> 'Our Common Future' accepts that the state, governments, and the international community, have to intervene to ensure 'sustainable development' – eradicate poverty, ensure justice for the poor who are outside the market, regulate market forces, make protection of the environment 'profitable' and penalise, and/or otherwise make 'unprofitable', the degradation of the environment.
>
> (1990, p. 35)

In the battle between the muscle of the US-backed transnational corporations and the principle of protecting the environment, there is only ever going to be one winner. Even as American, European and Japanese governments and corporations adopted a certain 'green-speak' about collective responsibilities to the environment, they forced through measures like S.301 of the US Trade and Tariff Act in 1984 and the 'super' S.301 of the Trade and Competitiveness Act in 1988 to legitimize unilateral rights to secure and protect their demands and interests. If 'natural resource-based products' were ostensibly inserted in the Uruguay Round of 1986 to create a database of export restrictions, they ended up being a part of an exercise in which the USA, European countries and Japan demanded access to the natural resources of the 'global south' (Raghavan 1990, p. 286).

Unsurprisingly, the landmark 1991 United Nations 'Earth Summit' in Rio de Janeiro, Brazil, once again reproduced this pattern of environmental 'principles' framed by, and in constant negotiations with, the principle of securing profit for the corporations and governments of the 'global north'. The Rio Summit was held in the context of a drastic reduction in the average per capita income within the 'global south' (by 1987, it was a pathetic 6 per cent of the average per capita income of the 'first world') and a similar reduction in the south's share of world trade (which stood at 25 per cent in 1987). Given this entrenched disparity in wealth distribution, it was obvious that very different visions of human relationships to the environment would be brought to the table. Rio did manage to produce non-legal principles that registered the global material reality. For example, principle 7 stated that:

> In view of the different contributions to global environmental degradation, States have common but differentiated responsibilities. The developed countries acknowledge the responsibility that they bear in

> the international pursuit of sustainable development in view of the pressures their societies place on the global environment and of the technological and financial resources they command.
>
> (Panjabi 1997, p. 318)

Other principles declared the obligation to protect indigenous communities and communities under 'oppression, domination and occupation' (principles 22 and 23). But the very fact that these were non-legally binding principles underlined how little value the northern governments put on the environment and equity issue. Moreover, other parts of the Rio Declaration potentially contradicted these principals. The 'non-legally binding authoritative statement of principles for a global consensus on the management, conservation and sustainable development of all types of forests' declared the 'sovereign and inalienable right' of all states to 'utilize, manage and develop their forests'. Quite how the governments of both the 'north' and the 'south', operating within the laws of transnational, corporatized market systems, would use their forest resources without contravening the rights of indigenous or occupied peoples remained unclear.

These trends in the environmental debates show beyond doubt the growing importance of 'environment' as a category in the analysis of global political and material conditions since the 1960s. Yet it is not difficult to discover the extent to which different, often mutually exclusive definitions, perspectives and methods, corresponding to distinct and often hostile political positions, have been jostling for dominance in these debates.

How does this play out in the fields of literary and cultural studies? In fact, the sets of historical and political ideas that we saw forming along the axes of 'deep' and 'social' ecologies, and the gradual coming together of environmental issues with those of imperialism and colonialism started to make their mark in the discussions and analyses of cultural texts in the late 1970s. From the outset, the academic fields that came to be recognized as postcolonial studies and eco-criticism would bear the mark (albeit to varying degrees) of their lineage in the various political and theoretical debates about environment that had been in the air in the decade immediately preceding their coming of age. This had both enabling and disabling effects. On the one hand, it helped in preparing a common ground for dialogue between the two fields: both postcolonial studies and eco-criticism evolved as they became aware of the gradual merging of the questions of empire and colonies (and their contemporary forms) and that of the environment

that was taking place. On the other hand, the conceptual contradictions that we have already seen entrenched in the various discussions of the environment begat a series of analogous contradictions within postcolonial and eco-critical studies. This led to a growing sense of both the need for dialogue between the two fields and the need to re-visit and take stock of some of the basic concepts that had previously been taken for granted. We now turn to a short account of this process, and where this has left postcolonial and eco-critical theories of literature and culture.

2
'Green Postcolonialism' and 'Postcolonial Green'

Literary exchanges

In an article written in 2004 on the increasing traffic between eco-critical and postcolonial literary studies, Graham Huggan noted that the 'green' turn in postcolonialism was in effect a sign of the scholars' admission that it was impossible to analyse modern imperialism and colonialism without engaging with the massive scale of environmental devastation that they entail (2004, p. 702). This, of course, was another way of saying that all colonial and imperial issues were, by their very nature, also environmental issues. Huggan went on to elaborate why eco-critical and postcolonial studies needed each other: whereas the former could help centre the material environment as the primary focus of the latter's critical perspective, the latter could help combat 'the tendencies of some Green movements towards Western liberal universalism and "[white] middle-class nature-protection elitism"' (ibid.) Following this, Huggan suggested five growth areas within this newly configured field of 'postcolonial green': environmental activism enhanced by properly analysed ideologies of development; textual practices foregrounding the politics of traditional environmental discourses; a correction of universalist ecological claims; initiation of debate on the rhetorical function and material effects of the discourses of anti-imperialist resistance and intercultural reconciliation; and finally, reinvigoration of utopic thinking in order to assist the global struggle for socio-economic and ecological justice (p. 720).

Writing a year after Huggan, Rob Nixon continued the analysis of the exchanges between the two literary-critical fields, but with the focus more closely on the schisms and discontinuities between them. Nixon identified four of these: whereas postcolonialists had traditionally

focused on hybridity and cross-culturations, eco-critics have been drawn to ideas of purity; postcolonialists concern themselves with displacements, whereas eco-critics give priority to a sense of emplacement; postcolonialists favour cosmopolitanism, but eco-critics favour a nationalist interpretative framework; finally, postcolonialists are devoted to rescuing marginalized pasts, while eco-critics imagine timeless, solitary moments of communion with nature (Nixon 2005, p. 235). Nixon admitted that he was concerned here with the dominant north American strain of environmental criticism marked by what he calls the 'wilderness' and 'Jeffersonian agrarianist' paradigms (a neat way of describing Leopold, Lopez and the like). With Huggan, he seemed to suggest that a dialogue between the two fields would help correct these blind spots. Postcolonial (often anti-historicist) exuberance about hybridity and transnationalism would be tempered by a good dose of sober focus on local, national and regional environmental specificities; and eco-critical ideals of purity, conservation and parochialism would be corrected by attention to the imperialist and capitalist bases underlying them. Similarly, the dominant Euro-north American nature paradigms would be replaced by the hitherto marginalized environmental concerns of the 'global south'. The implications for literary and cultural studies would be twofold. Nixon suggested that this dialogue would lead to an expansion of the literary canon and some properly comparative work (he suggests reading the north American Leslie Marmon Silko alongside the Australian Fabienne Bayet). Perhaps more importantly, Nixon notes that by provincializing north American environmentalism, 'postcolonial green' would help us revise the prevailing paradigmatic notions of what is implied by both the terms 'postcolonial' and 'environmental' (2005, pp. 245–6). We may note here that for Nixon, more so than for Huggan, in the exchange between eco-critical and postcolonial literary studies the former is the more comprehensively re-energized by the dialogue.

As we saw earlier, this coming together of the two academic fields has followed the shifts in the political and historical debates about environment whereby it has become impossible in the early years of the twenty-first century not to place the term itself against historical trajectories of imperialism, colonialism and the manifold resistances to them. It is not possible, for example, to hear the Sierra Club's William Douglas describe the Middle East as a cursed land without at least considering the possibility that the environmental catastrophe there being enacted is a direct result of centuries of imperialist control by the Ottoman, French, British and finally, American governments. Again, we are explicitly told that the challenge to Euro-north American environmentalism by the

southern 'ecology of the poor' is a historical consequence of both the colonialism of the past and the present struggles against its new forms. Our concern here is to trace the ways in which the theoretical and conceptual debates within literary and cultural eco-critical and postcolonial studies have absorbed the various fissures and contests within the historical and political debates about the environment. I want to show that these contradictions now enable and demand both a revisiting of the fields' formative gestures and a forging of a new direction along some relatively unexplored pathways.

Nixon and Huggan's proposals should both generate excitement and invite closer critical scrutiny. There can be little doubt that the institutional prestige of postcolonial studies in the USA and Britain (and to a lesser extent in France) over the past three decades has something to do with its often covert and sometimes overt celebration of the new world order of late capitalism and new imperialisms (the reflexive celebration of 'hybridity', 'border-crossings' and the like spring to mind). If, by engaging with eco-criticism, postcolonial studies is able to reclaim some of the radical energies it routinely ascribes to itself, then this can only be a good thing. But what precisely, are the components within environmentalism that will help it do so? My suggestion here is that in addition to a salutary injection of conceptual engagements with the 'local' or the 'regional', eco-criticism would need to bring something more to the table for the refurbishment of cultural postcolonial studies. Similarly, it is no secret that environmentalism and cultural eco-criticism frequently hold to a strategy of maintaining the global status quo. Nixon tells a nice story of the advertisement campaign run in the USA that used the figure of an Amerindian weeping at the destruction of his pristine lands to whip up anti-immigration sentiments against the Mexicans coming to California in search of work (2005, p. 237). And the catalogue of crimes committed in the name of preserving pristine nature continues to lengthen, from the ethnic cleansing of Yellowstone National Park to the stories of state violence against refugees in India in the name of preserving the natural habitats of tigers. Further, as we saw in the case of Aldo Leopold and the various examples of literary eco-criticism, a celebration of the lore of the land can suppress or understate much of the actually existing human cultural relationships with the environment. If engagement with postcolonial perspectives can help environmentalism and eco-criticism recognize that campaigns for purity and preservation of 'nature' are often vehicles for the progress of the very capitalism that they are trying to oppose, then they can start to assume effective oppositional positions. However, as before, we must ask

exactly which properties of the postcolonial lens would help the green movement to correct its blind spots? Again, I think that in addition to drawing attention to the legacies and continuing presences of colonialism and imperialism, postcolonial studies must offer some additional tools before eco-criticism can sharpen its cutting edge. Before we can rush to celebrate the fruitful exchanges between literary eco-criticism and postcolonialism, we need to assess how they have absorbed and reproduced in their conceptual promises the contradictions inherent in the structures of the wider political and historical debates about the environment and colonialism/imperialism. We will then be in a position to identify the missing elements in the two approaches that need to be incorporated before their merger can help them to fulfil their stated goals.

Conflicts and convergences

If we can (only semi-flippantly) take the number of impressively thick 'readers' on academic bookshelves as an indicator, both literary eco-critical and postcolonial studies are in robust institutional health. If these collections can also be seen as chronological markers of a field's maturity, eco-critical and postcolonial studies seem to have developed and entrenched themselves in US and British academia around roughly the same historical moment. Four leading 'eco-/green readers' appeared between the mid-1990s and 2003: Glotfelty and Fromm's in 1996, Laurence Coupe's in 2000, Adamson, Evans and Stein's in 2002, and Branch and Slovic's in 2003. The enthusiasm with which postcolonial studies has gone forth and multiplied is often remarked. Among the truly dizzying numbers of introductions, readers and anthologies within the discipline are those complied or written by Mongia (1996), Gandhi (1998), Brydon (2000), Chrisman and Parry (2000), Schwarz and Roy (2000), Young (2001 and 2003), Goldberg and Quayson (2002), Lazarus (2004), and Desai and Nair (2005).

These volumes seem to suggest that while *institutionally* these academic disciplines developed in the 1990s their *constitutive* theories and reflective practices were largely fleshed out from the early 1970s onwards. Diana Brydon acknowledges that 'postcolonial studies both inherit and transform the concerns of what in the '50s and '60s was often termed Third World Studies', but concludes that the term 'postcolonial' grew out of the political and economic discussions about decolonization in the 1970s and accrued a wide range of meanings associated with resisting and understanding both the various forms of

colonialism and the problems of globalization (2000, 1, p. 7). Similarly, Charlene Spretnak (1990, p. 5) talks of the rooting and flowering of eco-feminism occurring around the mid-1970s, and Glotfelty and Fromm date the formation of literary eco-criticism to around the same time. In other words, though both eco-critical and postcolonial literary and cultural theories often claim an intellectual inheritance of at least over two centuries and counting (to the Romantics and various eighteenth and nineteenth-century anti-colonial struggles respectively), in each case their contemporary lives may be dated roughly from Earth Day in 1970. That is to say, their formative moments coincide precisely with the worldwide environmental struggles and debates that we have just surveyed.

A look at the eco-/green studies anthologies that started appearing in the mid-1990s shows that the general pattern of conflict between the 'deep' and 'social' ecological approaches of the environmental debates found some precise echoes in the literary-critical debates. While Cheryl Glotfelty correctly noted in her introduction to the earliest of these anthologies that 'literature does not float above the material world in some aesthetic ether', it soon became clear that Glotfelty's conception of the 'material' owed more to the 'deep' ecological theory of the ecosphere – 'In most literary theory "the world" is synonymous with society – the social sphere. Ecocriticism expands the notion of "the world" to include the entire ecosphere' (1996, p. xix). For Neil Evernden, writing in the same volume, the 'really subversive element in Ecology rests not on any of its sophisticated concepts, but upon its basic premise: "inter-relatedness", where inter-relatedness is understood as "a genuine intermingling of parts of the ecosystem"' (Evernden 1996, p. 93). Although Glotfelty and Evernden quite properly emphasize the relationality principle, their accent is unmistakably 'deep ecological' in that they are not concerned here to specify the mode of such relationality, neither is there any sense of the mutual interpenetration of the human and non-human elements that make up the environment. In this 'deep eco-critical' perspective 'Nature' and 'Culture' are seen as discrete, if related, entities. In Richard Kerridge and Neil Sammell's 1998 collection, Jonathan Bate suggested that a 'bio-regional' perspective could provide a very different map of the world than that provided by the nation-states:

> A map divided according to bio-regions will look very different from one bounded according to nation-states, and that is why politicians, who think in term[s] of national interests, do not think

> bio-regionally ... A bio-region is by definition unique unto itself; it is a self-sustaining, self-sufficient natural oikos.
>
> (Bate 1996, p. 54)

This Leopoldian emphasis on a bio-region's capacity to disrupt the hegemony of the nation-state as well as, so Bate went on to claim, transnational capital, appeared in many subsequent eco-/green anthologies. Paul Lindholdt, in Branch and Slovic's 2003 collection, advocated 'learning the lore' of the bio-regions that one inhabits and defined bio-regionalism as the 'process of rediscovering human connections to the land'. For Lindholdt, such a process 'forms the first step toward altering society as a whole' (Lindholdt 2003, p. 244). As for the literary consequences of adopting such bio-regional perspectives, as Robert Kern puts it, this calls for a: 'fundamental shift from one context of reading to another – more specifically, a movement from the human to the environmental, or at least from the exclusively human to the biocentric or ecocentric, which is to say a humanism ... informed by the awareness of the "more-than-human"' (Kern 2003, p. 267).

It would be wrong, however, to suppose that literary eco-criticism has been exclusively dominated by 'deep ecological' positions. The 'social ecological' emphasis on the interpenetration of nature and culture has found strong proponents in literary studies ever since Raymond Williams. Writing in the same volume as Kern, Michael Bennett challenged what he called the primary gospel of 'deep ecology' – 'that we must abandon androcentric planning and develop a biocentric understanding of the environment' (Bennett 2003, p. 297). This orthodoxy, Bennett suggested, had led to an idealization of rural life and more importantly, carried two theoretical flaws within it: 'First, it establishes an absolute dichotomy between domination of humans and domination of the environment ... second, humans can only act on human values and make human choices, so it makes little sense of moving beyond human issues and adopting a biocentric viewpoint' (pp. 298–9). One result of this prevalent critical position, Bennett shows, was the environmental racism that often went hand in hand with 'deep ecology's' promotion of the preservation of endangered animal species at the cost of the urban and rural human victims of poverty.

In addition to the criticism of 'deep ecological' literary and cultural critical positions, the 'social ecological' strain has attempted to read culture in the light of an assumption of the essential continuity between history and environment. Jean Arnold's investigation of the geography of islands in European literary and cultural traditions reads Robinson

Crusoe's island not as a 'natural oikos' but as a construct that could absorb the issues of empire, religion and economics within its contours (2000, pp. 24–30). Similarly, Roger Anderson's analysis of Tolstoy's language suggests that the Russian writer saw human consciousness 'not as the product of our intellectual distance from the physical world but as the point where individual awareness connects with the material conditions that press upon it' (2000, p. 283). Perhaps unsurprisingly, feminist scholars working to unravel the ways in which the economic, political and sexual subjugation of women evolved historically, have found environment to be an indispensable category and have developed further powerful arguments against 'deep ecology'. As Irene Diamond and Gloria Orenstein observe in the introduction to their collection of eco-feminist essays:

> Feminists, who had been exploring alternatives to the traditional 'woman is to nature as man is to culture' formulation, who were seeking a more fundamental shift in consciousness than the acceptance of women's participation in the marketplace of the public world, began to question the nature versus culture dichotomy itself.
>
> (Diamond and Orenstein 1990, p. x)

Like the 'environmentalism of the poor' championed by Guha, Gadgil and Martinez-Alier, Diamond and Orenstein found the condition of the former colonies of the 'global south' to be a crucial factor in the development of a 'social ecological' critical perspective. It was their research into the struggles for women's social and political equality there that revealed these were also 'of necessity' environmental. Of course, this begs the question as to why the historical process of industrialization and capitalism in the 'global north' and their concomitant struggles for similar kinds of equality were not immediately obvious as environmental processes, but nonetheless, the eco-feminist commitment to the 'social ecological' perspective was real and meaningful. The critical and cultural consequences of this line of development may be seen, for example, in such works as Gayatri Spivak's translation and commentaries on the Indian writer Mahasweta Devi's short stories (*Imaginary Maps* 1995, *Breast Stories* 1997 and *Chotti Munda and his Arrow* 2003).

The 'social ecological' side of the debate was also energized by a series of popular protests against the political and environmental devastation wrought by global capitalism from the 1990s onward.

The Environmental Justice movement born out of these protests aimed specifically to redress:

> the disproportionate incidents of environmental contamination in communities of poor and/or communities of colour, to secure for those affected the right to live unthreatened by the risks posed by environmental degradation and contamination, and to afford equal access to natural resources that sustain life and culture.
>
> (Adamson et al. 2002, p. 4)

This was indeed 'environmentalism of the poor', with poverty no longer seen as confined to the 'global south'. The Environmental Justice movement took all 'deep' eco-critical positions to task for their inability to theorize the human (especially the urban human) into ideas of the environment. As Reed wrote, 'Sunsets apparently counted, while toxic gases do not. It would be hard to find a more succinct statement of the problem in much ecocriticism' (2002, p. 150). In fact, Reed specifically pointed to Glotfelty and Fromm's collection to suggest that: 'Ecocriticism is in danger of recapitulating the sad history of environmentalism generally, wherein unwillingness to grapple with the questions of racial, class, and national privilege has severely undermined the powerful critique of ecological devastation' (p. 146).

Even this brief look at the leading anthologies of eco-/green literary and cultural criticism reveals that the debates between 'deep' and 'social' positions that had characterized the social and political environmental debates from at least the 1960s also found their way into the conceptual and critical debates. This, in turn, has generated some basic and continuing contradictions that stand in need of a constructive resolution. Did the field of cultural and literary postcolonial studies have a similar relationship with the 'deep' and 'social' environmental positions?

Grounding postcolonialism

At first sight, it seems very strange that the 'greening' of postcolonial studies is of such recent vintage. For if the scholars who shaped the literary and cultural theories of postcolonialism from the mid-1970s were paying any attention at all to the voices of anti-colonial resistance that were supposed to be both the inspiration and subject of their studies, surely they could not have missed the importance placed on the issues of land, water, forests, crops, rivers, the sea – in other words, on the centrality of the environment to the continuing struggle of decolonization.

From Gandhi and then Nehru in India, to Kenyatta and Nkrumah in Africa, Nasser in the Arab world and Sukarno in Indonesia, the leaders of the peoples who made incredible sacrifices to win formal independence from colonialism and imperialism in the 1940s and 1950s realized that they could not really speak of social, political and economic progress without fundamentally redefining the relationship of their nations with their environments. Those African and Asian intellectuals who had either witnessed or participated in these independence struggles absorbed this lesson in their theories of anti-colonialism. Here, for example, is the Martiniquan Aime Cesaire in his lyrical meditation on colonialism:

> They dazzle me with the tonnage of cotton or coca that has been exported, the acreage that has been planted with olive trees or grapevines.
>
> I am talking about natural *economies* that have been disrupted – harmonious and viable *economies* adapted to the indigenous population – about food crops destroyed, malnutrition permanently introduced, agricultural development oriented solely toward the benefit of the metropolitan countries, about the looting of products, the looting of raw materials.
>
> (Cesaire 1993, p. 178)

For Cesaire, writing in 1972, there is no doubt that colonialism's brutality was necessarily expressed as a form of environmental oppression. Writing a year after Cesaire, Guinea-Bissau revolutionary Amilcar Cabral's thoughts on the relationship between a liberation struggle and the nationalist culture also had environment at their centre:

> Culture is, perhaps, the product of this history just as the flower is the product of a plant. Like history, or because it is history, culture has as its material base the level of the productive forces and the mode of production. Culture plunges its roots into the physical reality of the environmental humus in which it develops, and it reflects the organic nature of the society, which may be more or less influenced by external factors.
>
> (Cabral 1993, p. 55)

If Cesaire sees the continuity between human economies and non-human nature, Cabral's vision of culture grounds it very definitely in the rich loam of environment. It is not the mere use of natural imagery

(flower, roots, humus) that makes Cabral 'green', but his serious understanding of the materiality of culture, a materiality that is always already environmental. Not only were culture and economics seen as environmental within this tradition of anti-colonial thought, but in formulations such as Senegalese Leopold Senghor's 'negritude', human existence itself – 'being' – was seen as being constituted of a dynamic relationship with the non-human material universe. For Senghor, this oneness of the human and the non-human, 'discovered' relatively recently by the quantum developments in European science (he calls it a vision of the 'living, throbbing universe' where matter and spirit were locked in a network of relations called energy) had been for centuries the very basis of African philosophies and sciences. At the root of Senghor's claim for the cultural dignity of the colonized Africans lay a claim of their ability to exist harmoniously with the non-human world and the universe (Senghor 1993, pp. 27–35).

Cesaire and Cabral's ideas about the essential and necessary continuity between human culture and non-human environments were born out of their experiences of the realities of anti-colonial struggle, and seemed to articulate the basic premises of what came to be known as 'social ecology'. Senghor's view on the environmental human being, on the other hand, seems much closer to that of 'deep ecological' thought. At any rate, it would seem impossible, looking at these and other anti-colonial activists who struggled through the decades from the 1940s to the 1970s, that the theories of postcolonialism that arose after that period could entirely ignore the 'green' dimension of their thoughts. Yet, it seems largely true that the conceptual importance of the environment to anti-colonial struggles in Africa, Asia and the Latin American countries appears to be ignored in the foundational writings of the triumvirate of Edward Said, Homi Bhabha and Gayatri Spivak that formed the academic field of postcolonial studies in the mid-1970s and 1980s.

Unlike Cesaire, Senghor and Cabral, Said, Bhabha and Spivak's ideas about culture seldom place it within its environmental contexts. In their enormously influential texts, *Orientalism* and *Culture and Imperialism* (Said 1978 and 1993), *Nation and Narration* and *Location of Culture* (Bhabha 1990 and 1994) and *In Other Worlds* and 'Can the Subaltern Speak' (Spivak 1987 and 1988), culture, for these first-wave postcolonial theorists, remains largely a matter of texts and intertextuality. No doubt this scanting of the environment was a part of what Aijaz Ahmad has called postcolonial theory's forgetting (or should it be forsaking?) of the original anti-colonial contexts of its own critical

concepts (1996, pp. 276–3 and 1992). These theorists doubtless spoke frequently of history and historicity, but these references seemed to remain curiously wan because they were largely thought of as matters of representation and because of the lack of any sustained attention to the engines that drive the historical process. Thus, although these early theories of postcolonialism routinely talked of the politics and history of cultures, it seemed that this was politics and history of a curiously immaterial kind, detached from any worldly moorings.

Yet, a survey of the developmental trend of postcolonial studies reveals that this was a more a case of marginalization than the complete expulsion of the 'environmental' – even in the thinking of Said, Spivak and Bhabha. For example, a much-anthologized extract from Said's *Orientalism* shows him to be acutely aware of the actual material condition of the 'Orient' whose ideological images he is interested in decoding. He opens his discussion with an anecdote about a distressed French journalist lamenting the lost mystique of war-torn Beirut. After asserting that the 'Orient' was 'an integral part of European material civilization and culture', Said underlines the importance of bringing the physical environment of the Orient within the scope of his theory – 'We must take seriously Vico's great observation that men make their own history, that what they can know is what they have made, and extend it to *geography*' (Said 1996, p. 23; emphasis added). Said here is at the very least attentive to the fact that any analysis of the culture of imperialism must be grounded in the physical environment of imperialism's global conquests. However, the Foucauldian strain in his thinking quickly leads Said to ignore the possibilities of developing such a line of analysis and to retreat into a world of textuality:

> My principal methodological devices for studying authority here are what can be called *strategic location*, which is a way of describing the author's position in a text with regard to the Oriental material he writes about, and *strategic formation*, which is a way of analyzing the relationship between texts and the way in which groups of texts, types of texts, even textual genres, acquire mass, density, and referential power among themselves and thereafter in the culture at large.
>
> (Said 1996, p. 31)

A similar trajectory is found in Gayatri Spivak's celebrated essay 'Can the Subaltern Speak?', where she begins her enquiry by underscoring the importance of analysing the 'geo-political' coordinates of the

'universal' European subject formed through the ideological narratives of the west. But this opening is soon abandoned in favour of an exposure of the elite usurping of representative *discursive* positions regarding subalterns (Williams and Chrisman 1993, p. 66). It is true that neither Said's 'geography' nor Spivak's 'geo-politics' amounts to any explicit environmental position. However, even at the height of its engagement with the world of discourse, a glimmer of the materiality of the conditions of colonialism and postcolonialism – a glimmer inadequately expressed as 'geography' – flickered within the lofty vision of the postcolonial theorists who followed, and then departed from, the paths of Cabral, Senghor, Fanon and Cesaire.

Amongst the scholars who followed Said, Bhabha and Spivak, this faint glimmer did sometimes flare into full brightness. Anne McClintock's influential critique of the conceptual basis of postcolonial discourse analysis extended precisely the underdeveloped points of geography and geo-political coordinates in Said and Spivak. In arguing that the term 'postcolonial' essentially adopts the teleology of imperialist ideology and ignores the continuing reality of neo-colonialism, McClintock made explicit use of contemporary environmental facts. She begins her essay with the sinister image of the giant cold storage ships of the United Fruit Company roaming the seas in search of ever-cheaper products for exotica-hungry US housewives. McClintock goes on to explain the ways in which global financial institutions such as the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund (IMF) enable this piracy. A combination of real or threatened US military action, preferential trade treaties such as GATT and globalized finance capital enables the World Bank and the IMF to force Asian, African and Latin American countries to accept loans in return for implementing 'structural adjustment programs' (SAPs) which favour the miniscule elites of these countries and devastate the rest. McClintock lists some examples of the ecological fallout of SAPs:

> By 1989, the World Bank had $225 billion in commitments to poorer countries, on condition that they, in turn, endure the purgatory of 'structural adjustment' … the World Bank engineered one ecological disaster after another: the Indonesian Transmigrasi programme, the Amazonian Grande Carjas iron-ore and strip-mining project, and Tacurui Dam deforestation project, and so on. The Polonordeste scheme in Brazil carved a paved highway through Amazonia, luring timber, mining and cattle ranching interests into the region with such calamitous impact that in May 1987 even the President of the

> World Bank, Mr Barber Conable, confessed he found the devastation 'sobering'.
>
> (McClintock 1993, p. 301)

Indeed, even the much-heralded successes of the SAPs, the 'tiger' economies of Asia, paid the price of 'progress' in the form of an unprecedented rise of toxicity in their water, soil and food crops. By 1989, 2 per cent of Taiwanese farmlands were poisoned by industrial waste and 30 per cent of its main crop, rice, had unsafe levels of mercury and heavy metals (ibid.) New forms of imperialism and colonialism clearly took the shape of material environmental subjugation and wastage of the world – just as their older counterparts had done.

Such a clearly defined 'social ecological' perspective, admittedly, was rare amongst the postcolonial theorists writing in the 1990s.[1] However, throughout the decade, the impact of new imperialism became ever more visible in the burning oil refineries of Iraq, the battle for water and land in Palestine, the cluster bombs and mines in Afghanistan. Moreover, what McClintock called the 'myth' of development was becoming increasingly evident in the burning and shrinking tropical forests of the Amazon, Congo and Indonesia, poisoned water and food crops in south Asia and deaths from starvation in Africa. All the while, the heat generated by the debate about the effects of greenhouse gas emissions by the industrialized and the 'developing' countries rose along with the temperatures that were beginning to melt mountain glaciers and the polar icecaps. Given these historical conditions, and the concomitant expansion of the disciplinary boundaries and the importance of ecological and environmental studies, it became imperative for postcolonialism gradually to return to an acceptance of the conceptual importance that the anti-colonial intellectuals of the 1960s and 1970s had accorded to environment.

Bill Ashcroft – who, along with Helen Tiffin and Gareth Griffiths, has been responsible for the anthologizing of much of the most influential theoretical postcolonial writings – was amongst the first to signal this return to an environmental emphasis. In his 2001 book on forms of resistance in postcolonial societies, Ashcroft used some key environmental concepts – such as 'place', 'habitation' and 'horizon' – albeit not always in ways that clearly acknowledged their lineages in the green debates. Ashcroft's book appears to be an attempt to merge the textualist theories of postcolonial discourse and the materialist analyses that sought to re-interpret anti-colonial and postcolonial culture and politics by taking into account the historical environment of the world.

For example, 'postcolonial' is described by Ashcroft as constituting both 'a range of material conditions *and* rhizome pattern of discursive struggles' against colonization. Postcolonial discourse is said to belong to the colonized and begins *at the onset* of colonization and continues after the colonizers have left. And in addition to encompassing material conditions and discursive struggle, 'postcolonial' refers not to analyses of descriptions about real conditions, but to descriptions of descriptions of such conditions (Ashcroft 2001, p. 12). Ashcroft tries to acknowledge the importance of material conditions while giving primacy to an idea of discourse that is seemingly detached from those conditions (postcolonial struggle is a discursive struggle; 'postcolonial' itself describes forms of talk about the experience of colonialism). My point here is not so much that there are mutually irreconcilable tendencies in these concepts, but that Ashcroft's use of 'place', 'horizon' and 'habitation' to outline a strategy of resistance bears the same traces of contradiction that emerge in his definitions of the 'postcolonial'. For example, after correctly analysing the ways in which colonialism and imperialism simultaneously alter the material environment of the colonies and naturalize these brutal alterations through an array of epistemological tools such as maps, laws, historical, legal and ethical narratives, Ashcroft suggests that it is through habitation and 'horizontal' *thinking* that these colonial boundaries, both spatial and mental, can be transformed: 'Habitation describes a way of engaging colonial boundaries which neither ignores them nor rejects them but occupies them in a way which redeploys the power they administer. The corollary of this is a mode of thinking which transforms boundaries by seeing the possibilities – the horizon – beyond them' (p. 182).

If 'horizontality' is a way of thinking beyond the colonial boundaries, how exactly is it related to habitation, which is here described as a way of engagement and practice? Which generates which? How are their connections made? Ashcroft suggests that 'horizontality' is 'a way of being which itself defines and transforms place' but goes on, following Bourdieu, to link it to the notion of *habitus* – that is, a series of routine, relational practices through which humans form a sense of inhabiting a space. But who practices habitation and under what conditions? Who and what are related through these practices? These contradictions and omissions in Ashcroft's thinking are both productive and symptomatic, inviting further interventions and illuminating fractures at the core of cultural postcolonial theory.

As we saw earlier, the 'deep' environmental thinking of Leopold, Lopez and the Sierra Club members also used the ideas of habitations

and boundary-crossings. But these ideas were modelled on the ideal of the pioneer frontiersman (usually white) who downscales his city life for existence as a rural smallholder on land bordering the non-human wilderness. Ashcroft is clearly aware that this cannot be recommended to the vast majority of the colonized peoples of Asia, Africa and Latin America. However, since he does not attempt any 'social environmental' corrective to this position, does not specify the ways in which colonial and neo-colonial capital have shaped and continue to shape the global material environment and its relationship with humans and non-humans, his prescriptions of habitation and horizontal thinking remain to a large extent idealist. His critical tools, which owe much to the phenomenology of Husserl, remain aligned to the 'deep' environmentalism of Leopold. As a result, the tension between his acknowledgement of the critical importance of material environment and his methodological preference for discourse analysis and textualist idealisms surfaces at key moments in the book. No sooner are we told that 'it is in the creative reconstruction of the lived environment … that the key to a deep-seated cultural transformation may be found', than we find that 'place', one of the categories that is to be 'creatively reconstructed', is in fact 'much more than the land … in some sense place *is* language, something in constant flux, a discourse in process' (pp. 124, 155). If our place is to be found in discourse, what is its relationship with the lived environment?

By 2006, however, Ashcroft had explicitly made room for environmental debates in his postcolonial scholarship. The second edition of perhaps the most successful of the postcolonial studies anthologies, edited by Ashcroft, Tiffin and Griffiths, devoted an entire section to the environment. The introduction to this section reiterates Ashcroft's desire to bring the material environment of colonialism together with the cultural discourses into one analytical focus:

> But the consequences of European incursion were not confined to material effects, whether good or bad. The hegemonic power of Europe's economic and scientific rationalism also, in time, extinguished indigenous ontologies and epistemologies, re-defining for much of the world, the very nature of human *being* and land, flora and fauna.
>
> (Ashcroft et al. 2006, pp. 491–2)

However, the essays chosen to illustrate this form of analysis raise familiar, if interesting, problems. Alfred Crosby's 'Ecological Imperialism' and

Richard Grove's 'Green Imperialism' tend to present both empire and environment as homogeneous, unspecified entities. Crosby's pioneering thesis of there being a 'biological, an ecological, component' in European imperialism's success is marked by, for example, a picture of colonial and neocolonial dynamics shorn of some of its essential properties. Crosby correctly emphasizes that alongside guns and capital, it was European biota's ability to drive out or overwhelm non-European life-forms that led to the global establishment of the 'new Europes' or settler colonies in Australia and the Americas. But this argument cannot entirely avoid the pseudo-Social Darwinian spectre of a clash between monolithic 'European' and 'non-European' environments where one vanquishes the other. Although he is careful to stress that the biological or environmental component supplemented the social, technological and political aspects of imperialism and colonialism, Crosby's undifferentiated concept of the environment leads him inevitably to a misrepresentation of the postcolonial situation:

> An extraordinarily, perhaps frighteningly, large number of humans elsewhere in the world depend on the Neo-Europes for much of their food, and it appears that more and more will as world population increases … Often in defiance of ideology and perhaps of good sense, more and more members of our species are becoming dependent on parts of the world far away where pale strangers grow food for sale.
>
> (Crosby 2006, pp. 496–7).

There are two basic problems with Crosby's apocalyptic vision here. First, a significant number of people actually growing and processing food in the Americas and Australia are not pale at all, being hired rural labourers and factory hands from Latin America, Afro-Americans and, increasingly, Asian immigrants. Second, the non-Europeans who depend on the 'new Europes' for their food do so not because of any genetic or environmental handicap, but because a combination of guns, predatory capital and the international diplomatic treaty system dominated by 'old' and 'new' Europes ensures the continuation of their dependent status. In a similar vein, Richard Grove argues that while colonialism and imperialism devastated the global environment, they also, paradoxically, gave rise to the modern (postcolonial) conservation movement at the behest of concerned European officials who sought to protect and use rationally the world's natural resources in the face of the rapaciousness of their own governments (Grove 2006, pp. 499–500). However, Grove's argument also has at least two basic problems, the first of which

is that it unequivocally equates environmentalism with conservation and leaves no room for the view that it is precisely conservationist practices that often lead to massive environmental degradation (as we have seen being argued by a host of environmentalists from Leopold to Guha). It would have been more productive had Grove demonstrated the ways in which the European and colonial lineage of conservation practices in fact leads to continuing environmental problems. Second, postcolonial conservation is given an exclusively European and colonial lineage, completely ignoring the history of a host of environmentally sustainable conservation practices carried out by colonized peoples worldwide.

In equating environment with 'nature', and in their vision of the world divided into homogeneous Euro-north America and the rest, Crosby and Grove seem to use some of the basic elements of both 'deep' and 'social' ecology. But Ashcroft et al.'s other choices bear out the strengthening grip of 'social ecology' on postcolonial studies. The statement by the Nigerian activist Ken Saro-Wiwa on the eve of his trial on trumped-up charges that led to his conviction and execution is a poignant demonstration of the impossibility of any postcolonial struggle *not* being at the same moment a struggle for environmental equity. Saro-Wiwa's words clearly demonstrate that the war waged on the people of the Niger delta by the Nigerian ruling classes and the oil company Shell is necessarily, at the same time, both political and environmental (Saro-Wiwa 2006, p. 501). Val Plumwood's (2006, p. 504) essay on the process of decolonization demonstrates that it is capitalist colonialism that formulated the dualism that placed human beings outside nature and that reproduced the difference between human and non-humans as inferiority. Plumwood goes on to show how 'deep ecological' paradigms that insist on the purity of the 'wilderness' reproduce this ideology and 'leave[s] us without adequate ways of recognizing and tracking the agency of the more-than-human sphere in our daily lives, since this rarely appears in a pure or unmixed form' (ibid., p. 506). Finally, Cary Wolfe (2006, pp. 511–12) shows that the universalizing scope of environmentalism, particularly of the 'deep' variety, rests on twin conceptual prongs wherein human cultures are seen as being separate from nature, and capitalist democracy is accepted as the 'natural' form of human cultures.

Ashcroft et al.'s selections, along with Huggan (2004) and Nixon's (2005) recent essays, surely mark the formal recognition of postcolonial studies' explicit engagement with eco-/environmental debates. By the same token, it is clear that postcolonial studies have absorbed the

various fractures between and within the 'deep' and 'social' ecological positions, and as a result are now in need of some remedial action. For instance, the 2006 edition of *The Postcolonial Studies Reader* (Ashcroft et al.) demonstrates a curious grasp of environment as a conceptual category. While the essays grouped under the section titled 'environment' refer to biota, non-human life-forms, land and forests, the organizational logic of the volume presents several other sections such as 'place', 'diaspora', 'history' and 'production and consumption' as separate from or falling outside the environmental category. Yet, the contents of these sections are very clearly engaged with examining the continuities between human and non-human life-forms that make up the global environmental matrices. How can Bob Hodge and Vijay Mishra's essay on the relationship between the stylistics of Australian Aboriginal visual art and the land and habitation patterns of these peoples, gathered here under the section 'place', not fall under the sign of 'environment'? Graham Huggan and G. Malcolm Lewis's essays, appearing in the same section, ask to be read as analyses of the production of human knowledge (both colonial and colonized) in relation to the material environment of their societies; Salman Rushdie and Edward Said's essays, here appearing under 'diaspora', talk about the relationship between cultural production (art and philosophy) and human movements away from one kind of environment to another; Paul Carter's contribution specifically looks at the relationship between space and historical narratives, but it appears under the section on 'history'; another piece by Graham Huggan shows the way in which the 'postcolonial' is exoticized via the dynamics of core and peripheral geographical-economic locations of production, but the section's title, 'production and consumption', downplays the crucial importance of the geography and the environmental specifics of the places of production.[2] The point is not that all these concepts, such as 'place' or 'diaspora', should be totally subsumed under the broader concept of 'environment', but that the organizational and categorical divorce between the narrower concepts and something called 'environment' in this volume might signal the need for postcolonial studies to pause and reconsider what exactly it thinks environment is.

Common threads

It should be noted that even before the recent discussions about the 'green' turn in postcolonial studies and the 'postcolonial turn' in eco-/environmental studies, scholars working within these fields had

commented on shared concerns and recognized common connective threads. Campbell (1996, p. 131) noted the similarities between 'deep ecology' and post-structuralist philosophy in general – 'both criticize the traditional sense of a separate, independent, authoritative *centre* of value or meaning; both substitute the idea of *networks*' (emphasis in original). Dominic Head detected their attempted theoretical empowerment of the hitherto marginalized –'A position of informed recentring, then, is common to different branches of postmodernism, such as postcolonialism and ecologism' (Head 1998, p. 29). In their respective first-wave stages of institutional consolidation in the 1970s and 1980s, both fields claimed nothing less than a comprehensive critique of European modernity, in particular, its core components of capitalism, colonialism/imperialism and patriarchy. They positioned themselves as being integral to the oppositional activism of decolonization and environmental/green movements. Also, a strong self-critical impulse has been a central feature of both disciplines.[3] This has led to some comprehensive examinations of their own institutional locations, ideological orientations, and ultimately, the relevance/accuracy of their oppositional claims. As we have seen in the previous chapter, the very foundational nomenclatures of eco-/environmentalism have been subjected to severe revision. A similar critical spirit has been a feature of postcolonial studies. Diana Brydon (2000, p. 8) points out that 'as early as 1989, Ketu Katrak was writing about the need to decolonize postcolonial theory'. Arif Dirlik, like Aijaz Ahmad, has found in the term 'postcolonial' an expression of the newly found privilege of certain sections of the mobile cosmopolitan elites of the 'global south'. Neil Lazarus and Benita Parry have made important criticisms of the idealist and textualist strains in postcolonial studies.[4]

In this self-critical move common to both fields, we might discern a second wave (which does not necessarily follow the first wave chronologically, but often overlaps with it) that is historicist, materialist and feminist, and that calls for both disciplines to abandon 'historicism without a sense of structure'.[5] Perhaps such a direction is already implicit in Huggan, Nixon and Buell's mapping of the future directions that the merged field of eco-/poco studies could take. At any rate, I am suggesting that it is this strand that needs to be much more thoroughly revived in order to reinvigorate the disciplines individually and in combination with each other. Our look at the trajectories of literary and cultural eco-critical and postcolonial studies tells us that having absorbed the global eco-/environmental debates of the past half century or so, their union has generated a series of crucial conceptual

knots that demand to be untied. What can the 'postcolonial' questions of continuing forms of imperialism, resistance and modalities of power bring to the study of the relationship between human culture and non-human nature? How can the emphasis on the 'environmentality' of history make the analysis of global dispensation more specific, sharper and more relevant? What will a theoretical framework that fuses 'postcolonial' with 'environmental' perspectives look like? How can it help in the reading and decoding of contemporary cultural products? To come up with an answer to these questions, the area to which we bring the awkward names of 'postcolonial green', 'eco postcolonialism' and the like, I think will have to strengthen and revive the conceptual importance of the philosophical perspective of historical materialism that has been implicit in much of the 'social ecological' and second wave postcolonial positions. The history of this philosophical position, in its modern incarnation at least, stretches back to the radical wing of the European Enlightenment. A careful mining of the materialist seams of ecological thinking will not only make eco-criticism more analytically robust, but will also make its corrective contribution to postcolonial studies more meaningful. Similarly, an engagement with and gathering of the materialist positions found, especially in what I have called second wave postcolonial studies, will both animate the field itself with new energy, and enable it to ground eco-criticism within the broader contexts of old and new colonialism and imperialism. Most crucially for our purposes, a materialist 'postcolonial green' perspective will enable us to engage fully with the problem of the correspondence between the formal and stylistic properties of literary and cultural expressions and their historical environmental conditions.

In other words, if eco-critical and postcolonial studies have been rendered contradictory by their absorption of the global debates about the environment, the possibility of overcoming these contradictions can also be generated from within them. By revisiting and strengthening the philosophical strains of materialism that are present in them, these theoretical fields can resolve some abiding conceptual problems and develop new ways of reading the symbiotic relationship between literary and cultural texts in relation to the environment. We now turn to provide some proof for the claims I have made here for the materialist tradition's presence in thinking about historical environments.

3
Towards Eco-Materialism

Environment and aesthetics

A few things emerge from our discussion so far. First, there is a palpable synergy between literary and cultural eco-critical and postcolonial studies, both of which have absorbed the global debate about the environment from the 1960s onward; second, one of the signature remits of these two approaches is to show how the environment (understood in its properly expansive sense of being always interpenetrated with history) and cultural forms shape and enable each other. Further, I have suggested that the various conceptual contradictions in the two fields may be resolved by carefully mining a critical and philosophical strain that has hitherto been submerged or at best only sporadically visible within them. This is the tradition of historical materialism, and in this chapter we will test out this claim.

However, this proposition poses a fresh set of questions and trajectories for our argument. Materialist 'green postcolonialism' or 'postcolonial green' perspectives might help us in creating a framework that, to borrow from Adorno, historicizes nature and naturalizes history, but how do we use this framework specifically to interpret cultures and literatures? For this, we need to think about the forms, shapes and contents of cultural texts that both determine and express particular relationships with their environments. In short, we need to ask whether the reconfigured fields of 'green postcolonialism' and 'postcolonial green' would have anything of note to contribute to aesthetic and philosophical debates over the matter of representation and the representation of matter. And we need to see whether the philosophy of historical materialism offers us any clues about this.

I want to start here by noting that cultural eco-criticism and postcolonial criticism, have, of course, engaged extensively with this crucial (crucial, that is, for any aesthetic/theoretical gesture) issue of representation or mimesis. However, their relatively sporadic engagement with materialist thinking as such, to my eyes at least, has often led to a rather thin initial conceptualization of culture and environment themselves. It is this weakness, I suggest, that both eco- and postcolonial cultural criticism should attempt to correct. Philosophical materialism, primarily derived from debates within the European Enlightenment and post-Enlightenment periods, has been unevenly present in both eco-critical and postcolonial approaches. I want to argue for a much more sustained and energetic excavation and resuscitation of this perspective. I also want to outline the benefits of such a move by using the example of the various debates about culture, representation and textuality that have emerged within the discipline of cultural geography. In fact, cultural geography is one of the academic fields with which eco- and postcolonial cultural criticism should develop a sustained dialogue, given how much common interest they share and the extent of the benefit that should accrue from such an exchange. Many of the debates that are now buffeting the formative moments of 'postcolonial green' have also been central to cultural geography, and we can learn from the avenues that these have opened up. I would like to see whether some of the conceptual propositions derived from cultural geography can be combined with some of the more venerable, if relatively neglected (at least as far as aesthetic and cultural theories are concerned), ideas from within the materialist tradition itself, such as that of combined and uneven development, and whether this move can in turn provide us with the tools to construct what we can call an eco-materialist aesthetic. But first, we turn to the question of philosophical materialism's engagement with matter, environment, culture and history.

Thinking with matter

Most recent thinking on the question of environment and culture within Anglo-American academia has at some point been compelled to turn to the pioneering work of Raymond Williams for theoretical cues. Let us recall the passage in 'Ideas of Nature' that we have already looked at – 'I intend an emphasis when I say that the idea of nature contains, though often unnoticed, an extraordinary amount of human history'; and again, 'A considerable part of what we call natural landscape … is the product of human design and human labour, and in admiring it as

natural it matters very much whether we suppress the fact of labour or acknowledge it' (Williams 2005, pp. 67 and 78). Here, Williams presents the key ideas of nature and history interpenetrating each other and of the production (as opposed to domination) of nature. At the time he was writing, and for a considerable period after that, these ideas were not welcome in European and American environmental circles, which were dominated by 'deep ecological' perspectives. The idea of the cultural production of nature or environment smacked too much of the anthropocentric hubris that 'deep ecology' was trying to eradicate. A little later in the same volume, Williams explicitly links his conception of the environment to his analysis of materialism as a philosophical position. He considers Sebastiano Timpanaro's definition of materialism as: 'the acknowledgement of the priority of nature over "mind", or if you like, of the physical level over the biological level, and of the biological level over the socio-historical and cultural level; both in the sense of chronological priority … and in the sense of the conditioning which nature still exercises on man' (p. 106).

Williams realized that the challenge for Timpanaro lay in using a humanist, anthropocentric language that assumed the divisibility of environment and humans in order to describe a relationship that is at the same time, both indivisible and complex (humans as an essential component of the environment, and yet, through biological and economic evolution able to think of themselves apart from it). For Williams, the difficulty and the strength of philosophical materialism lies precisely in its ability to conceptualize the mode of interaction that links humans and the environment – a mode that is always dynamic and differentiated – called labour. 'In a world of a properly materialist history', says Williams, 'there is no room for the separate abstract categories of "nature" and "man"' (p. 111). And to construct a materialist ethics and aesthetics, Williams concludes, one has to accept this basic condition of an always-existing interaction between humans and environment, history and nature (p. 116).

The indivisibility of humans and environment, the interpenetration of nature and history, the dynamic relation between the two established via human labour – these key concepts fuse environment to the very heart of materialist philosophy as Williams sees it. Sebastiano Timpanaro, the thinker discussed by Williams, suggested that it was precisely this tradition of environment-infused materialism – what we might call 'eco-materialism' – that had been suppressed by an anti-materialist reaction in all major European and American philosophical trends, including European Marxism, from the late nineteenth century onward

(Timpanaro 1975, p. 137).[1] To the elements of human-environment relationality that Williams models for us, Timpanaro adds two more factors. First, as a corollary of the primacy of nature over mind, he insists on the relative passivity of human intellect and labour. As he explains: 'I did not at all say that knowledge is *passivity*. I simply said that there exists in knowledge – even in its most elementary form, sensation – an element of passivity, irreducible to the activity of the subject. There is, in other words, a stimulus coming from the external world which is precisely the "given"' (p. 54).

A great deal of modern European and north American philosophy, Timpanaro suggests, ignores this element of relative human passivity and instead, by overemphasizing the 'active side' of experience, creates an illusory and ultimately destructive notion of human superiority (p. 56). The spectre of something passing for Enlightenment rationality and materialism is now routinely blamed for unleashing the ideology of the anthropocentric conquest of nature. In reaction, as we have seen, much of contemporary European and north American green thinking has fashioned a vision of an environment purified of any human contamination. But what should interest us is the fact that Timpanaro offers a critique of anthropocentrism very much from within the materialist tradition – in the idea that the relationship of humans to nature contains simultaneously active and passive elements. As a condition that is always already given, there can be no question of human primacy – neither epistemological, nor sensory or practical – over 'nature' or environment. This model of human-environmental relationship, one that avoids illusions of anthropological domination as well as those of illusory purification of nature, gives us the basis of precisely the kind of 'weak' anthropocentrism that green thinking is now beginning to use as a route out of the intellectual impasse in which it has found itself over recent years.

In addition to the idea of relative passivity, Timpanaro raises the question of the specific relationship between one form of human labour – the cultural – and the environment. This question, of course, is central to our purposes here. If we accept the premise that the material environment is the enabling condition of all human labour, including cultural labour, and that just as we cannot think of the environmental without the human neither can we think of the human without the environmental, then we have come to the question of how exactly the environment enables activities such as writing a novel or a poem, or performing a piece of theatre, cinema, or composing music or painting. As Timpanaro puts it: 'It seems to me that the concept of superstructure,

even understood non-mechanically, cannot include the totality of cultural activities … Philosophy, science and art do not draw stimulus and nourishment solely from the "artificial terrain" of society, but also from the "natural terrain"' (pp. 47–8; emphasis in original). Williams and Timpanaro's elaborations, then, steer us towards the question of how exactly human cultural labour is conditioned or enabled by the 'natural terrain'.

The basic materialist philosophical positions that might underpin conceptual elements of an aesthetics I am calling 'eco-materialism' begin to emerge from this discussion involving Williams and Timpanaro – the essential unity of humans and environment, of history and nature; a constant, dynamic and differentiated relation between humans and environment through labour of all kinds; the centrality of material environment in relation to human cognitive processes and the relative human epistemological passivity before it; finally, the specific enabling condition that the environment offers to all human cultural activities. Clearly, some of these elements have been explicitly present in the environmental debates we have looked at before, especially in their 'social ecological' variants. But others have not been, and I am suggesting that literary eco-criticism or 'postcolonial green' cannot afford to employ a 'pick-n-mix' approach to core conceptual frameworks. As we shall see, there is already a precedent for a thorough use of materialist premises in theorizing culture within the 'new' (or in some versions the 'new' new) cultural geography that emerged around the same time as eco- and postcolonial criticism put down their institutional roots. And we shall use this example to outline the critical possibilities that can be unleashed by such a move. Meanwhile, do Williams and Timpanaro's claims that their ideas are derived from the post-Enlightenment materialist tradition, especially as found in the thoughts of Marx and Engels, hold true? Did environment as a concept command any importance in the materialist tradition before being marginalized by the political and philosophical reactions of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries?

There seem to be some grounds for thinking so when one looks at the very substantial engagements with the idea of nature into which the *philosophes,* at least from Diderot onward, entered. Of course, this is not quite the same as the concept of environment that we have argued for here, but should rather be seen as the foundational move for the realization of such a concept. As Vartanian (1953, pp. 75–95) has shown, 'nature', understood not so much as an entity exterior to, but more as a process necessarily inclusive of, the human, was found in the thinking of Diderot, Buffon, Le Mettrie and others. Along with this dynamic and

relational view of nature, went the position of 'weak' anthropocentrism that we find in Timpanaro. Diderot repeatedly cautioned against anthropocentric arrogance:

> Who are we to explain the ends of nature? Do we not perceive that it is almost always at the expense of her powers that we extol her wisdom; that we reduce her resources by more than what we could ever make up to her intentions? This manner of interpreting nature is bad … The physicist … will therefore abandon asking why, and will busy himself only with the question: how.
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> (Assazet 1875–77, quoted in Vartanian 1953, p. 106)

For the *philosophes,* the material and epistemological primacy of nature necessarily imposes limits and horizons on human capacity, even on the capacities to think or to theorize. The notion of a dynamic universe also gave rise to the idea of evolution – a process that linked both organic and non-organic matter. 'Why should I not extend to the universe what I believe to be true for animal life?' asked Diderot, going on to assert that 'motion continues and will continue to combine masses of matter until they gain an arrangement in which they will persist' (Niklaus 1951). Animal life, including the human, essentially beat with the same rhythm that coursed through all matter in the universe. Humans cannot be looked at as a category distinct from the natural. And if humanity and nature interpenetrated each other, human and non-human lives were, again, essentially the same. La Mettrie famously argued this in his homage to Descartes, *L'Homme Machine:*

> That famous philosopher … understood animal nature. He was the first to have demonstrated perfectly that animals are pure machines … It is just this strong analogy that compels all scientists and competent judges to confess that those proud and vain beings distinguished more by their pride than by the name of men … are, at bottom, only animals and perpendicularly crawling machines.
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> (La Mettrie, 1774, vol. 3, quoted in Vartanian 1953, p. 206)

This materialism insists not only on weakening anthropocentrism, but also on a dynamic physical continuity between humans and their environment. Moreover, human and non-human life is placed on a similar, but differentiated evolutionary continuum. Clearly, many of Darwin's later ideas were anticipated here, but it was Marx and Engels who theorized the next step in materialist thinking – the specific mode

of the relationship between collective human existence (history) and the environment of which it was an indivisible part.

Nature, labour, history

Marx and Engels accepted some of the key ideas that Diderot and his colleagues generated in their investigations. The chronological, physical and epistemological primacy of nature was taken as foundational by Marx – 'Man has not created matter itself. And he cannot even create any productive capacity if the matter does not exist beforehand' (Parsons 1977, p. 122). And *contra* Timpanaro, even the relatively early Marx insisted that nature was not something that existed outside humanity: 'That man's physical and spiritual life is linked to nature simply means that nature is linked to itself, for man is a part of nature' (1964, p. 112). The decisive intervention made by Marx and Engels had to do with specifying the kind of relationship that existed between humans and their non-human surroundings – a mode that they called labour. I would suggest that it is with the idea of labour as a force linking earth's humans and non-humans that we begin to move from the dualism of 'man' and 'nature' to the singularity of an 'environment' that is the sum of the relationship of all its components. In *Capital*, Marx wrote:

> Labour is, in the first place, a process in which both man and Nature participate, and in which man of his own accord starts, regulates, and controls the material re-actions between himself and Nature. He opposes himself to Nature as one of her own forces … By thus acting on the external world and changing it, he at the same time changes his own nature.
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> (Marx 1991, vol. 1, p. 177)

Although initiated by humans, labour can be seen both as a mediating and a differentiating process through which humans interact with nature as a part of itself at the very moment they change it. As Howard Parsons (1977, p. 5) points out, this entire matrix of human-nature relationship is what we begin to understand as a 'field' and a static notion of nature here has been transformed into that of 'environment'.

Marx and Engels went on to place these ideas of labour and environment at the heart of their materialism and their analysis of capitalism. The process of production appears as a 'double relationship: on the one hand as a natural, on the other hand as a social relationship' (Marx and Engels 1947, p. 20). The result of this process under capitalism, the

commodity, is always composed of the human and non-human elements: 'the bodies of commodities are combinations of two elements – matter and labour … if we take away the useful labour expended upon them, a material substratum is always left, which is furnished by nature without the help of man' (Marx 1991, vol. 1, p. 43). The value that capitalism puts on commodity lies precisely in downgrading its environmental component and abstracting human labour from it: 'material wealth, the world of use-values, exclusively consists of natural materials modified by labour … but under capitalism, the social form of this wealth, exchange value, is nothing but a … social form of the objectified labour contained in the use value' (Marx 1988, vol. 30, p. 40).

As Paul Burkett (1999, p. 82) puts it, for Marx, 'Nature contributes to the production of use values; yet capitalism represents wealth by a purely quantitative, socio-formal abstraction: labor time in general.' This downgrading or devaluing of nature is not just some side effect of the capitalist system. On the contrary, it lies at the heart of its mechanism. Capitalism depends on the dissolution of the ties between the labourer and her or his environment, what Marx calls the 'dissolution of the relation to the earth – land and soil – as natural conditions of production – to which he relates as to his own inorganic being (1973, p. 497). This alienation of the labourer from her or his environmental condition generates the motor of demand that animates the capitalist system: 'This pulling away of the natural ground from the foundations of every industry, and this transfer of its conditions of production outside itself, into a general context – hence the transformation of what was previously superfluous into what is necessary, as a historically created necessity – is the tendency of capital' (1973, pp. 527–8).

At every level of the Marxist analysis of capitalism we find the conceptual presence of environment. In *Capital*, Marx foresaw the inevitability of the production of 'constant capital' (machines, factories and so on) outstripping the availability of the organic raw materials – hence leading to spiralling rises in their prices. Also, the growth of urban centres, and their final outstripping of the rural formations, Marx thought, would prevent the 'return to the soil of its elements consumed by man in the form of food and clothing … violating the conditions necessary to lasting fertility of the soil' (1991, vol. 1, p. 505).

Williams and Timpanaro, then, are quite right to argue for the conceptual primacy of environment in a materialist philosophical tradition that stretches right back to Descartes and Diderot and then to Marx and Engels. From the Enlightenment *philosophes* we have the ideas of the primacy of nature, the dynamic relationship between all human

and non-human elements of nature, and 'weak' anthropocentrism. Marx and Engels added to these the specific type of the relationship between the human and non-human elements (labour), and offered us a way to analyse the modern and contemporary state of this relationship (capitalism), which has resulted in permanent ecological and economic crises – there being no way of separating the two. With this idea of a specific kind of relationship between humans and non-humans, it also becomes possible to transform a somewhat static idea of nature into the more expansive and dynamic concept of the environment.

It may well be, as Timpanaro suggested, that this kind of thinking has largely been ignored by modern and contemporary Euro-north American philosophers, critics and political theorists of all kinds. But elements of it have been present, sporadically at least, within both the 'deep' and 'social' varieties of cultural eco-criticism. Neil Evernden, we recall, highlighted the idea of 'everything is connected' as being the truly radical premise of the environmental movement. But Evernden, in a move typical of first-generation eco-critics, shies away from stating the full implications of this relationality – the impossibility of separating history or society from nature. In Evernden's writing, it is not clear in what capacity, or to what extent, human society interpenetrates the natural. Moreover, like many of his colleagues, Evernden is suspicious of any systemic or totalizing explanatory framework for this exchange. This, it seems, is what Timpanaro meant when he talked of a European and north American anti-materialist reaction. Certain materialist concepts are acknowledged, but the totality of the approach is disavowed. As a result, there is no way of overcoming some basic contradictions. For much 'green' thinking, for instance, there has been no way to square the demands for preserving the tropical forests of the Amazon or the Congo with the fact that these can only be preserved at the cost of severely degrading millions of human and non-human lives and their environments, most of which exist outside the Euro-north American core. One must walk the talk of relationality for it to have any real charge.

Similarly, postcolonial criticism of the same period seems to have accepted some selected materialist premises. For example, the philosophical emphasis on the limits and horizons of human capability – what we have called 'weak anthropocentrism' – finds its precise echo in the celebrated postcolonial call for the decentring of the (European) man. However, the adoption of this position, by and large, has not led postcolonial criticism to analyse the differentiated and relational specificities of the allegedly decentred European man's condition. For much

of postcolonial theory, there is neither much attention paid to the new and interconnected global elites who have allied themselves to these allegedly (and in reality, very far from) vanquished transatlantic male rulers of the world; nor is there much attention paid to the relationship between the cultural labours of these new elites and those of the members of the rest of the stratified society that they dominate. Postcolonial theory has been notoriously shy of making any systemic interpretation of the very historical conditions it has claimed as its own interpretative zone. As recently as 2005, Tim Brennan could puzzle about the fact that 'postcolonial critics have done so little to offer an original theory of the economy' (2005, p. 102). And since, as we have seen, any engagement with material realities entails an engagement with the environment, and despite a number of important scholarly works on 'green imperialism', the global spread of germs and colonial famines, postcolonial criticism is only just beginning to wake up to the idea of colonialisms and imperialisms, old and new, as a state of permanent war on the global environment. Without a doubt, this extremely selective attitude of both eco-critical and postcolonial cultural theories to the philosophy of historical materialism can be explained in terms of global geopolitics and the sociology of Euro-north American academic sectors during the final two or three decades of the twentieth century. However, over the same period of time, another academic field – that of cultural geography has conducted a pretty thorough self-assessment by taking the questions of materialism, environment and aesthetics seriously. In the following section, I want briefly to compare the debates within cultural geography to that of the eco- and postcolonial criticism that we have been looking at, in order to show both what postcolonial criticism (at least to some extent) has been missing, and what the postcolonial critics can learn from the geographers.

'Summoning life'

Although cultural geography traces its roots to Carl Sauer's 'Berkeley school' group in the 1940s and 1950s, it was really only over the last decades of the twentieth century – at very much the same time that eco- and postcolonial criticism were laying down their academic roots – that it transformed itself from a niche, specialist geographer's sub-field to a vibrant, major academic discipline. Nigel Thrift and Sarah Whatmore, editors of perhaps the most thorough survey of this process, pinpoint the formation of cultural studies during the 1980s as an important coordinate for this renewal of cultural geography (2004, vol. 1, p. 1).

Thrift and Whatmore also point out that from its earliest days, cultural geography was marked by interdisciplinary dialogues: with anthropology and archaeology in the Sauerian 'classical' phase; with literary theory and cultural studies during its renewal in the 1980–90 period; and subsequently, with science studies and performance studies (p. 9). David Atkinson and his colleagues have also observed this propensity, noting in the introduction to their survey that the critical charge of cultural geography is derived, in addition to its interdisciplinary reflex, from a variety of dissenting activist traditions such as Marxism, anarchism, feminism and environmentalism (Atkinson et al. 2005, p. x).

From these diverse philosophical, theoretical and activist traditions there emerged some key areas of cultural geographical concerns – 'the question of nature; the nature of knowledge … the sense of self … notions of subjectivity … work on animals and other organic entities whose unruly presence was increasingly seen as demanding a new natural contract which would give them voice' (Thrift and Whatmore 2004, vol. 1, pp. 3–7). As will become evident even from this brief summary, these focal areas are far from being peculiar to the territory of cultural geography, but have obvious overlaps with both eco-critical and postcolonial theories, overlaps that are acknowledged as such by Thrift and Whatmore, Atkinson et al. and others. But what I want to pick out here, beyond these shared grounds and the more or less noncontroversial recommendation of a more sustained dialogue between them that follows from it, are a few specific conceptual elements that might sustain such a dialogue. In particular, I would suggest that if both eco-critical and postcolonial studies have been marked by their struggles to find a convincing materialist theory of culture and in particular, of representation, they could do far worse than pay attention to the conversations within cultural geography that engage with precisely this issue.

Given its obvious roots in the study of human habitation patterns, the making of landscapes, the formative process of spaces and places, traditions of husbandry and other kinds of human-animal relationships, it is not surprising that for cultural geography the question of the material bases of culture is more or less a given. As Atkinson and his colleagues insist, while questions of identity formation, citizenship, forms of belonging, concepts of space and place, landscape and environment comprise core concerns of cultural geographers, its signature move is to 'link such ideas and imaginations with our changing material world' (Atkinson et al. 2005, p. vii). This assertion simply reiterates earlier statements by geographers, such as Mike Crang (1998, p. 1), who in an early textbook on the subject wrote that: 'culture, however defined, can

only be approached as embedded in real-life situations, in temporally and spatially specific ways'. Alongside this reflexive and salutary insistence on the materiality of culture, the issue of representation is another crux of philosophical and methodological debates for cultural geographers. A cursory glance at some of the foundational cultural geographical literature should be enough to make us aware of the centrality of this issue to all the conceptual debates within cultural geography. For example, the idea of land/landscape and space/place being at the same time material and ideological surfaces early and insistently in the annals of cultural geography. Crang talks of land as readable text and draws our attention to the importance of mimetic acts such as literature to cultural geographers (pp. 40–3). And his category of 'non-places' such as airports, international borders or bureaucratic centres is entirely dependent on the idea of symbolic representation, 'governed by texts, be they instructions to show your passport, time-tables … In each case the relationship to the environment is distanced and often dominated by images' (p. 114). For Crang and others, cultural mimesis is always expressed as material and socio-political phenomena. In the case of land/landscape, for example, Don Mitchell (2005, p. 50) explains that: 'It [landscape] is a representation of what is and what can be. But, importantly, it works normatively like this largely to the degree that it is a physical form, a concrete materialisation of social relations, and not "merely" a representation, important as representations can be and are.' And in the case of space/place, Phil Hubbard (2005, p. 42) draws on Lefebvre to suggest that these are produced by a three-way movement between 'perceived, conceived and lived space' and thus require an interpretative trialectics of cultural practices, representation and imagination.

This intense focus on the materiality of representation and representation of matter has also enabled cultural geography to stage an important philosophical and aesthetic debate on the issue of representation itself. Drawing on the anti-mimetic philosophy of Martin Heidegger, Ludwig Wittgenstein and John Dewy, 'new' cultural geographers have questioned the essential divisibility between humans and the material world that the traditional mimetic theories posit (Thrift and Whatmore 2004). At the heart of this move, as Ola Soderstrom (2005, p. 13) explains, lies a desire to examine and reform 'the politics of representation, i.e., who has the power to produce authorised representations of the world and what/who are the legitimate objects/subjects of … representation'. By suggesting that truth and knowledge were produced in the flux and ebb of actions and interactions and not in some mimetic act that captured the exact correspondence between the material world and humans (which thereby

presumed a separation and distance between them), geographers such as Nigel Thrift have proposed the aesthetics and philosophy of 'non-representation' that frequently draws on the field-work of anthropologists and philosophers of science such as Bruno Latour (2005, p. 14).

The debate within cultural geography about the philosophy and aesthetics of representation should provide eco-critical and postcolonial studies with important theoretical and methodological cues. Take Bruno Latour's analysis of the field-work of a group of scientists working in the Amazon rain forest (2004, vol. 2, pp. 364–96). Observing how they obtain soil samples and convert them into interpretable data, Latour suggests that the scientist's work unwittingly illuminates the entire philosophical question of mimesis: 'The sciences do not speak of the world but, rather, construct representations that seem always to push it away, but also to bring it closer' (p. 368). For Latour, scientific texts are essentially composite and performative (made up of diagrams, preserved samples, prose analysis, charts and so on) which retain and display the matter and labour that go into their making. This provides a model for the way in which human knowledge is obtained, not 'in the face to face confrontation of a mind with an object, any more than reference designates a thing by means of a sentence verified by that thing; but rather in the constant circulatory, translatory and transformative movements in which elements such as matter and language lose some of their own specificity in order to gain some of the others' (p. 389). As Latour puts it, 'the earth becomes a cardboard tube, words become paper, colors become number' (ibid.) This emphasis on the transformative capacity of matter and language, the human mind and body's ability to make them become each other, dissolves the classical problem of mimesis with its assumed distance between acts of representation and the things represented:

> The whole tired question of correspondence between words and the world stems from a simple confusion between epistemology and the history of art. We have taken science for realist painting, imagining that it made an exact copy of the world. The sciences do something else entirely – paintings too, for that matter. Through successive stages they link us to an aligned, transformed, constructed world.
> (p. 395)

The knowledge of phenomena cannot be found at some meeting point mid-way between things and words, but in the process of circulating references that link them.

Latour's propositions are of interest to any debate on mimesis, but they are of specific interest to eco-critical and postcolonial theorists in so far as they pay special attention to the irreducible importance of matter to acts of cultural representation as well as to the notion of the performative texts. Latour's test case here is confined to scientific texts, but there is no reason to assume that his notion of complex, anti-mimetic representation should not be applicable to literary or other kinds of cultural texts as well. As he acknowledges, paintings can perform in the same way as scientific reports. Anti-mimetic or 'non-representational' philosophical and aesthetic theory should at the very least encourage us to approach literature by pathways other than the ones littered with the predictable slogans of 'pastiche', 'hybrid', 'postmodernist' and other by now over-familiar road signs of textualist post-structuralism. It invites us to look anew at the specific material environments of the texts, and the specific representational or performative strategies that this enables or compels these texts to adopt. If, as Nigel Thrift argues, cognition and representation can account for only a very small portion of the human interaction with the environment that we call everyday life, and most of the other 'thinking' is performed by the body as it learns to 'register and become sensitive to what the world is made of', we need to find a way to read how or to what extent texts register this summoning of life by the human mind (Thrift and Whatmore 2004, vol. 2, pp. 440–1). If eco-critical and postcolonial theories are to have any lasting impact, surely they must be able to account for the specificities of the literary or cultural modes that enable this act of summoning.

Before we leave the realm of cultural geography, we should note that some initial gestures have already been made by geographers towards collaboration with eco-critical and, in particular, postcolonial theories. Broadly speaking, the geographers have argued for the necessity of differentiating and specifying what they see as the unsuitably generalized concepts of 'environment' and 'postcoloniality'. As Sally Eden (2005, p. 61) has pointed out: 'The contested character of environmental meanings is thus geographically nuanced. At the same time as being constructed through global environmental rhetoric and agendas, the environment is differentiated locally.' And while acknowledging that postcolonial studies abound in the analysis of spatial images such as location, mobility and exile, Alison Blunt (2005, p. 175) has pointed out that it has ignored more material geographies in favour of 'their imaginary counterparts'. To correct this imbalance, Blunt proposes a challenge to both temporal and spatial binaries between a colonial past and postcolonial present; that more attention be paid to how flows of

capital, people and knowledge produce both colonial and postcolonial spaces (p. 179). These advances yield such studies as Williams-Braun's perceptive essay on the way in which colonial practices of appropriating land and disenfranchising indigenous peoples continues to shape the way nature is understood in postcolonial British Columbia (Williams-Braun 2004). Such analyses compel us to 'renovate our conceptions of historical time' and focus on the 'multiple temporalities of colonialism/postcolonialism, the many considerations and ellipses that arise when these different temporalities are convened in relation to each other' (p. 328). Such are the directions that critical analyses can take if the dual focus on a thoroughly materialist concept of culture and texts that employ complex and non-normative representative practices can be maintained. If eco-critical and postcolonial studies are able to learn from the internal debates of cultural geography, they should be able to energize the field of literature in the same way that cultural geography has energized the field of geography.

(Re-)enter matter

Indeed, we might say that the sustained focus that both eco- and postcolonial criticism has trained on the 'social' has already prepared them for a thorough re-engagement with materialist concepts. Eco- and postcolonial criticism have been discovering how to cross-fertilize each other through an ongoing dialogue, and a stronger materialist re-articulation of their positions should make this exchange about culture and society even more fruitful.

A large part of this 'socialization' of environmental studies has come as a result of a 'postcolonial turn' in the field, one of the evidences of which may be seen in how the 'environmentalism of the poor' has come to challenge the Euro-north American 'deep ecological' paradigms. As we have seen, scholars such as Ramachandra Guha and Juan Martinez-Alier have suggested that this 'environmentalism of the poor' is the signal condition of the postcolonial global south, originating in 'social conflicts over access to and control over natural resources: conflicts between peasants and industry over forest produce, for example, or between rural and urban populations over water and energy' (1997, p. xxl). Surveying a range of grassroots environmental movements, ranging from protests against big dams, logging and nature parks in colonial and postcolonial India to anti-eucalyptus activism by Thai farmers and anti-(strip) mining organizations in Peru, Guha and Martinez-Alier write: 'One might broadly say … that poor countries and poor individuals

are not interested in the mere protection of wild species or natural habitats, but do respond to environmental destruction which directly affects their way of life and prospect for survival' (p. xx). This 'southern' perspective can lead to crucially different interpretative strategies. While European supporters of the Nigerian environmental activist Ken Saro-Wiwa – who was eventually executed by the Nigerian government on trumped-up charges – saw his struggles as either a 'human rights' issue or as efforts to preserve the environmental purity of the Niger delta, Saro-Wiwa saw himself fighting for 'ethnic autonomy, resource and environmental control'. For him, there could be no separation of the political from the environmental (Guha and Martinez-Alier 1997, p. xx). Such a perspective, Guha argues, is unique to the countries of the 'global south' and is made possible by the specific historical conditions there; conditions that Guha and Gadgil lay out in the beginning of their environmental history of India:

> India today is a veritable cauldron of social conflicts, many of which pertain directly to the control and use of natural resources … This is a society that contains within its ranks Stone-Age hunter-gatherers of the Andamans and white-collar babus of Delhi, nomadic shepherds of Himachal Pradesh … engineers drilling the Bombay High for off-shore oil … While obesity clinics sprout up in Madras and Bangalore, fully one-third of the Indian people cannot afford to buy enough food to keep their body and soul together.
>
> (Guha and Gadgil 1995, pp. 2–3)

Note that in these representative passages, the return of the 'social' into environmentalism is made possible only by placing categories such as modes of labour and specific modes of historical relationship at their centre. Some of the central concepts of the materialist tradition we have looked at – the interpenetration of nature and history, the differentiation and struggle in human society in relation to environment as a specific mode of capitalism – are clearly, if silently, present in this 'social' ecology.

Similarly, recent postcolonial criticism has not only shown signs of an environmental turn (as Huggan 2004 and Nixon 2005 show); but has more self-consciously used materialist concepts to revise and challenge some of its own foundational gestures. Thus Tim Brennan theorizes the trajectory of the institutionalization of the discipline within the material conditions of the neo-liberal reaction of the USA in the mid-1980s that resulted in a 'double bind comprising incompatible traditions' in

postcolonial criticism (Brennan 2005, pp. 102–3).[2] This meta-theoretical perspective – which depends on detailed attention to the historical and material conditions that shape institutions – has also become pronounced in the recent work of Gayatri Spivak. Consider Spivak's work on the figure of the 'resident alien', which is premised on a careful analysis of the class positions of the diverse group of humans hitherto celebrated by postcolonialism under the umbrella term of 'diaspora':

> Today's NRI [non-resident Indian] is no Resident Alien. He is on the Internet, conjuring up Hindu nationalism. He is a DIPSO – dollar-income-private-sector-operator – sitting in Bangalore but part of what Robert Reich has called the secessionist community of electronic capitalism. He is in the metropolis, recoding upward class-mobility (mimicry and masquerade) as resistance, destabilization, intervention.
>
> (Spivak 2002, p. 60)

Note again how the introduction of the concept of global capitalism drastically changes the charge of earlier postcolonial celebration of concepts such as 'mimicry' and 'masquerade'. Now we know their real functions – and these are very far from the radicalism that was routinely claimed in their name not so long ago. And we should remember that scholars such as Benita Parry and Neil Lazarus consistently adopted materialist postcolonial positions throughout the 1990s. Lazarus, for instance, exposed the first-wave postcolonial celebration of border-crossings, transnationalism and hostility to all forms of nationalism as ideologies of the material configurations of a US-dominated global new order. In an incisive analysis, he goes on to show how a foundational figure in the field, such as Homi Bhabha, signally misrepresents Frantz Fanon's socialist internationalism in order to legitimize a reflexive rejection of nationalisms everywhere, including anticolonial and anti-imperial struggles (1999, pp. 78–84). Parry (2004, p. 4), in turn, has analysed the textualist and anti-historicist bias expressed in much of postcolonialism's obsession with 'cultural discourse':

> The abandonment of historical and social explanation was soon apparent in the work of those postcolonial critics who disengaged colonialism from historical capitalism and re-presented it for study as a cultural event … Because a negotiatory cultural politics deduced from partial … readings of colonialism's texts displaced the record of repressive political processes, the contradictory, volatile

> but all the same structurally conflictual positions occupied by the heterogeneous categories of colonizer and colonized were muted, and incommensurable interests and aspirations immanent in colonial situations conjured into mutuality.

While Brennan, Lazarus and Parry's positions are clearly not 'environmental' in any explicit sense, they are valuable precisely because they are able to historicize 'first-wave' postcolonial studies not within the intellectual history of postmodernism, but through an attention to the material conditions of the emergence of theoretical perspectives such as post-Fordist 'flexible accumulation', the political collapse of the European communist bloc and the US-led global wars to achieve neo-conservative dreams of 'full spectrum domination'. And the full implication of such materialism can only be realized once their environmental components are allowed conceptual centrality.

The conversation between eco- and postcolonial literary and cultural criticism and historical materialism is then already a reality. So is their respective regular and intermittent engagement with materialist perspectives. Given this potential, what can a fuller engagement with the environmental core of materialist philosophy, and in particular, of historical materialism, do to enhance their labours of cultural criticism? In respect to philosophical groundings, some answers readily offer themselves. It strengthens the 'relationality principle' by showing the simultaneous and mutual presence of the global and local in every cultural phenomenon, thus helping to avoid the pitfalls of 'eco-parochialism' and neo-conservative 'transnationalism' that often hobble eco-critical and postcolonial studies respectively. It helps us focus on the process of the production of 'nature' and thus steers us away from ideas about protecting 'pristine' nature that have hitherto dominated the conservationist green arguments; and by opening up the question of how the differences and variations in global material conditions enable the production of differentiated and varied cultural texts, it has the potential to provide a framework for a sustained comparative work on global cultures – as suggested by Nixon (2005) as one of the primary concerns of both eco-critical and postcolonial studies. These philosophical pathways in their turn generate specific methodological and theoretical possibilities. Incorporating the example of the cultural geographer's investigations into the complex relationship between representation and matter, and their corresponding notions about complex performative texts, an 'eco-materialist' aesthetics should help account for and compare the stylistic and generic specificities of texts produced in different parts of the world.

If the radical relationality implied in the eco-critical mantra ‘everything is connected’ holds true, it should provide a comparative framework for the interpretation of global cultures and literatures. Equally, the material basis of the global condition should remain at the heart of this move. Thus, a concept of the material unevenness of the world and its aesthetic consequences becomes another indispensable ingredient for a cultural eco-materialist theory for it to have any bite.

Representing an uneven world

The material unevenness of the world, is of course, a familiar and important concept to Marxist historical materialism.[3] If Marx and Engels’s analyses of the dynamics of labour that connected human and non-human entities make it possible to theorize global and local phenomena within the same critical gesture, ‘uneven development’ provides us with a valuable key. As Neil Smith (1984, p. xv) explains:

> The logic of uneven development derives specifically from the opposed tendencies, inherent in capital, towards differentiation but simultaneous equalization of the levels and conditions of production. Capital is continually being invested in the built environment in order to produce surplus value and expand the basis of capital itself. But equally, capital is continually withdrawn from the built environment so that it can move elsewhere and take advantage of higher profit rates … The pattern which results in the landscape is well known: development at one pole and underdevelopment at the other. This takes place at a number of spatial scales.

The world under capitalism, Smith argues, is a thoroughly differentiated physical environment divided between zones of production, where surplus value is generated by vast quantities of productive capital which is spatially fixed, and zones of consumption (p. 88). At the same time, the very nature of capitalist production – the relentless conversion of ‘use-value’ to ‘exchange-value’ – results in differentiation within human society (class) as well as human alienation from nature: ‘certain aspects of nature are available to some classes only as conceptual abstraction, not as a physical partner or opponent in the work process’ (p. 42). This simultaneous differentiation between the world’s materiality and human society takes the form of a dynamically linked global and local process that transforms nations both externally and internally: ‘Under the banner of benevolent colonialism, capitalism sweeps before

it all other modes of production, forcibly subordinating them to its own logic. Geographically, under the banner of progress, capitalism attempts the urbanization of the countryside' (p. 49).

As a theory of global historical and material conditions, uneven development enables us to hold the national, international, local and regional levels within the same analytical moment. It also adds further sophistication to the notions of differentiation and specificity, as the totality of the global physical space is now shown to be composed of specific units that while following the unfolding of the general trajectory of historical capital carry specific permutations that demand specific analyses. It is not hard to see what such a theory can bring to the refinement of the interpretation of historical environmental or postcolonial conditions. For example, 'environmentalism of the poor', can now no longer be seen as the responses of the entire populations of the 'global south' to an environment that is specific to them. Rather, the 'global south' itself emerges as being composed of fractures that run along class lines that condition the various relationships of humans with their environments. At the same time, at the level of the general global condition, since this same 'global south' still occupies a structurally different position from the powers of the Euro-north American zone in the dynamics of production and consumption, we can still speak of a generally different relationship between the majority of humans and the environment here in contrast to that of the majority of the people of the 'global north'.

To take another example, the concept of the production of environment is strengthened through uneven development's focus on the dialectics between 'space' and 'nature'. As Smith (1984, p. 32) points out:

> Nature is generally seen as precisely that which cannot be produced; it is the antithesis of human productive activity. In its most immediate appearance, the natural landscape presents to us as the substratum of daily life, the realm of use-value rather than exchange-values … But with the progress of capital accumulation and the expansion of economic development, this material substratum is more and more the product of social production … it is in the production of nature that use-value and exchange-value, space and society are fused together.

What this means for eco-critical and postcolonial studies, is that we can no longer talk of 'green' conservation or even 'sustainable development' as the road to salvation, but have rather to see them as the flip-sides of worldwide 'modes-of-resource' conflict and competition; on the

other hand, we can no longer talk about old and new colonialisms and imperialisms without also considering the ways in which these are structured by capital.

But whereas the explanatory power that the theory of uneven development brings to our thinking about the historical and material environments of the postcolonial world may be more or less evident, what can it bring to our account of the cultural productions of that world? In fact, the theory of uneven development has an explicit cultural component, developed first by Leon Trotsky as a part of his analysis of the Russian Revolution. If, for Trotsky, the uneven economic development of Russia could lead to the political development and the mobilization of the revolutionary proletariat, it also had a major cultural consequence:

> A backward country assimilates the material and intellectual conquests of the advanced countries. But this does not mean that it follows them slavishly, reproduces all the stages of their past … The privileges of historic backwardness – and such a privilege exists – permits, or rather compels, the adoption of whatever is ready in advance of any specified date, skipping a whole series of intermediate stages.
>
> (1977, pp. 26–7)

For Trotsky, this explained the sophistication and singularity of the Russian novel form in the hands of Turgenev, Dostoevsky and Tolstoy. The development of the Russian novel had not followed that of French and British novels precisely because its material conditions were markedly different from those of France and Britain. In their task of mediating the reality of nineteenth-century Russia, novelists performed a kind of evolutionary jump – fusing the form of the 'classical' western European novel with local and regional styles, forms and subjects. The resulting innovation marked a branching out in the family history of the novel form itself. Trotsky sees this cultural consequence of uneven development as part of a general historical law:

> Unevenness, the most general law of the historic process, reveals itself most sharply and complexly in the destiny of the backward countries. Under the whip of external necessity their backward culture is compelled to make leaps. From the universal law of unevenness thus derives another law, which, for the lack of a better name, we may call the law of combined development – by which

> we mean a drawing together of the different stages of the journey, a combining of separate steps, an amalgam of archaic with more contemporary forms.
>
> (p. 27)

The particular value of Trotsky's thesis as I see it here, is his emphasis on reading culture historically – an emphasis that is often missing from the work of his compatriot Lenin. In addition to revealing the conditions of colonial cultures, this thesis invites us to take a fresh look at the cultures of the postcolonial societies of the world. Occupying zones of radically uneven development and unspeakable poverty, they have nonetheless produced some of the most consistently radical contemporary cultural forms – think of the cinema of a Satyajit Ray, or a Ousmane Sembene or a Tomas Gutierrez Alea; or if we are talking of the novel form, a Manik Bandyopadhay, Alejo Carpentier, Abdul Rahman Munif or a Pramodya Ananta Toer. Trotsky's theory draws our attention to the correlation between stylistic moves and the uneven penetration of capitalism into the spatial and physical spaces of postcolonial societies. It enables us to set up a comparative framework where different texts produced across a diverse range of zones and times may reveal their stylistic and formal homologies as clues to understanding their historical and material conditions.

The idea of uneven cultural development, then, provides us with a third set of conceptual tools towards the making of an 'eco-materialist' framework for eco-critical and postcolonial studies. It compels us to think of the differentiated conditions of the production of cultural forms within the larger trajectory of the historical development of capital. Further, instead of attempting to locate aesthetic value in the exotic uniqueness of a cultural form, we can look for it in the stylistic and formal moves employed there as a result of a relationship with other cultural forms inhabiting similar environmental matrices. These enable us to take the ideas about non-mimetic representation and performative texts further forward. We can now begin to map these textual aesthetics onto the specific environments of the world's historical conditions.

There has, then, been a long tradition of materialist thinking about the relationships between environment and culture. The various developments within this tradition, stretching back to the Enlightenment, give us a range of ideas about the mutual production of nature and culture, of representative tactics that exceed the normative mimetic standards, of texts that perform and embody their environments, of differentiated and specific levels of material reality that correspond to differentiated

and specific stylistic and formal cultural moves. These ideas, I suggest, add a crucial dimension to the kind of interpretative framework that eco-critical and postcolonial studies (or even the product of its union, the field of 'green postcolonialism') have been trying to construct. We can begin to talk about an environmental or eco-aesthetics that offers a thoroughly worldly critical perspective. We can talk about how differently various human groups conceptualize and relate to their environments. We can map this difference on the basis of their differentiated modes of productive activities. Indeed, we can begin to talk of the economic, political and cultural production of the environment at the very moment we reject purely anthropocentric assumptions. Such an aesthetics or theory of culture I have been tentatively calling eco-materialism.

In what follows, I want to use the conceptual elements that we have encountered here to offer a series of readings about novels produced from within or related to the contemporary postcolonial space of India. I want to see whether the use of ideas such as non-mimetic complex representation, the aesthetics of uneven development, the materiality of culture, performance and stylistic traffic between various cultural forms can offer us ways of accepting the rich meanings that these texts offer us – riches that I suspect remain untapped by the current normative critical approaches.

4
The River and the Dance: Arundhati Roy

I want to begin our discussion of specific examples of the cultures of postcolonial environments by looking at an Indian writer who by virtue of her highly visible political activism has become closely identified as one of the faces of what Guha and his colleagues have called the 'environmentalism of the poor'. I want to suggest, contrary to what a lot of literary critics have suggested, that it is a firmly held conviction of the inseparability of environment and history that supports Arundhati Roy's political and aesthetic work, and that we cannot understand these without engaging with that conviction. I want to show how Roy's novel, the only one she has published to date (there are strong rumours that she is completing her much-awaited second novel), reveals itself as a register of the environment of uneven historical development specific to postcolonial India. In order to engage fully with this text we will have to bring to it the environmental-historical aesthetic that we have been calling 'eco-materialism'.

With some notable exceptions that I will look at below, for most critics and commentators it is Roy's deft narrative style that explains the phenomenal global success of her 1997 Booker prize-winning debut novel, *The God of Small Things*. One consequence of this focus on literary style is that 'Roy the author' is frequently seen as a different creature to 'Roy the activist', who is perhaps best known for her flamboyant and committed opposition to the construction of the gigantic dam system on the river Narmada in the Indian states of Gujarat and Madhya Pradesh.[1] Roy herself, however, in numerous interviews and essays, has expressed her irritation with this formula that neatly separates her literary labour from her political ones: 'I've been wondering why it should be that the person who wrote *The God of Small Things* is called a writer, and the person who wrote the political essays is called an activist? True,

The God of Small Things is a work of fiction, but it's no less political than any of my essays' (2002, p. 175).

Of course it would be wrong to say that the politics of Roy's novel have been entirely missed by her readers. The plot of the novel sees the twins Estha and Rahel reunited with each other after a long separation following a series of traumatic incidents that ended their childhood. These involved the accidental drowning of their English cousin, a random sexual attack on Estha and the discovery that their mother was involved with a man in an affair that crossed caste and class lines. Estha and Rahel's reunion, nearly three decades after these events, ends in them having an incestuous relationship. Evidently, Roy's evocation of sexual politics and the politics of sexuality in a small town in the southern Indian state of Kerala has provoked much heated debate and in some cases, vociferous protests (Ahmad 1997, pp. 103–11). There is much of value in these criticisms that do make an effort to read Roy politically, as someone like Aijaz Ahmad does. But we will see that a full engagement with the politics of Roy's novel needs to understand the symbiosis between environment, history and culture. Schematically speaking, we might lay out the argument thus: Arundhati Roy's literary style, form and subject (just like those present in the works of Amitav Ghosh and some of the other writers we will also look at) are deeply-considered artistic responses to the historically specific condition of uneven development in India, a condition that cannot be understood as long as we understand environment as a separate category to those of history and culture. So, Roy's novel, and the others that we will consider below, demands the application of an eco-materialist perspective which sees environment, history and culture in their real, mutually interpenetrated condition. Before we consider what such an integrated reading of Roy's novel might look like, let us pick out the major strands in the existing critical literature on it.

Uneven style

A dominant theme in the critical reception of Roy's novel has been an alleged stylistic unevenness, which has drawn both negative and positive comments. Thus, Prasad (2004, pp. 214–15) talks about Roy's omniscient third-person narrator who is:

> possessed of his/her own consciousness which gives shape to the linguistic expression and unconventional words and phrases, syntax and structure … as a result we have broken sentences, illogical statements,

> unrestricted sprinkling of italics, bizarre phrases, ungrammatical constructions, unconventional rhythm.

Similarly, M.P. Sinha has noted the juxtaposition of interior monologues with dramatic scenes and a narrator who is 'sometimes a young girl of seven or mostly, a young woman of thirty-one and occasionally a person who, knows everything but is Rahel neither at seven nor at thirty-one' (2001, p. 75). In making such critical assessments, what these writers have in mind are passages such as this:

> Now if you'll kindly hold this for me,' the Orangedrink Lemondrink Man said, handing Estha his penis through his soft white muslin dhoti, 'I'll get you your drink. Orange? Lemon?'
>
> Estha held it because he had to.
>
> 'Orange? Lemon?' the Man said. 'Lemonorange?'
>
> 'Lemon, please,' Estha said politely.
>
> He got a cold bottle and a straw. So he held a bottle in one hand and a penis in the other. Hard, hot, veiny. Not a moonbeam…
>
> 'Good,' the Orangedrink Lemondrink man said. 'Excellent'.
>
> His hand closed tighter over Estha's. Tight and sweaty. And faster still.
>
> *Fast faster fest*
> *Never let it rest*
> *Until the fast is faster*
> *And the faster's fest*
>
> (Roy 1997, pp. 103–4)

However, others have seen the novel's strength lying precisely in this stylistic and formal unevenness. This deceptively simple account of Estha's sexual abuse, for example, can be shown to employ a range of narrative devices that lend a supreme sophistication to Roy's novel – portmanteau neologisms, capitalizations, a radically unstable narrative voice (the omniscient narrator's but also Estha's, and the eerie chorus that chants a sinister rhyme at the end that does not belong to either), proliferating points of view, and finally, a fusion of the analeptic and the proleptic (this is an event that is in the past of the adult Estha and Rahel, but told as a 'flash-forward' within the story-line that will culminate in the deaths of Sophie Mol and Velutha). These elements make up what Madhu Benoit (1999, p. 99) sees as the 'double-time pattern', involving 'chronological time, or time pertaining to diagesis' and 'a-chronological time, or time pertaining to history'. Benoit sees Roy's narrative as being organized

around two juxtaposed time sequences – the thirteen days in 1969 when the twins, Estha and Rahel are seven years old, and one day in June 1992, when they are thirty-one. The analyptic, proleptic and elliptic movements which shift the narrative between these two sequences are further employed within them, producing a temporal zigzag that produces much of the pleasure of this text (Benoit, 1999, p. 101).

Others have agreed on the productivity of this narrative style, but have gone on to contrast its success with Roy's failure to extend it to the thematic content of the novel. Here, Ahmad's analysis can be taken as paradigmatic. Ahmad enthusiastically concedes the pre-eminence of Roy's stylistic moves:

> A key strength of Arundhati Roy is that she has written a novel that has learned all that there is to be learned from modernism, magic realism, cinematic cutting and montage and other such developments of narrative technique in the 20th century, but a novel that nevertheless remains Realist in all its essential features. She knows what Realist fiction always knows: love, grief, remembrance, the absolute indispensability of verisimilitude in depiction of time, place and character, so exact that we who know it to be fiction nevertheless read it as the closest possible kin of fact.
>
> (Ahmad 1997, p. 103)

For Ahmad, Roy is the first Indian writer in English who has used such 'marvellous stylistic resource' to represent a 'provincial, vernacular culture without any effect of exoticism or estrangement'. And, unlike say, Vikram Seth, 'her Realism folds into itself all the plenitude of narrative techniques that the 20th century has spawned' (p. 108). It is a great pity then, for Ahmad, that Roy's radical style is diluted by what he sees as a failure of her political nerve. The central importance given to the illicit romances of Estha and Rahel (incestuous, and thus against family norms) and Ammu and Velutha (across caste lines, and thus against social norms) in the novel achieves, for Ahmad:

> the privatisation of both pleasure and politics, which leads then to sheer aggrandisement of the erotic relation in human life, as a utopic moment of private transgression and pleasure so intense that it transcends all social conflicts of class, caste and race … This sexual phallocentric utopia then dismisses the historical actuality of the field of politics as either irrelevant or a zone of bad faith.
>
> (p. 104)

Sex in the novel, then, marks Roy's failure to imagine the reality of the collective struggle to achieve social and economic justice that has been a feature of Kerala's recent history.

However, yet another group of readers have refused to endorse Ahmad's diagnosis of the political failures of Roy's novel. For Alex Tickell, Roy provides an example of critical sensibility that, while remaining acutely aware of the grievous shortcomings of the contemporary mantra of globalization and cosmopolitanism, is equally able to distance itself from any uncritical 'nativism'. This she does by combining 'linguistic flexibility, telepathetic child protagonists, and Western form' with 'a mythic-popular content' (Tickell 2003, p. 74). For Tickell, it is this 'mythic-realist' style that is the result of the fusion of the normative realist novel's (western) form and 'local' content that provides the novel's political charge. While all local and regional cultural and political specificities of the novel are always already marked by their commodification within the contemporary global dispensation, Roy is able to offer a vision of agency that cannot always be subsumed under the sign of that commodification. Tickell sees this, in particular, in the attention Roy lavishes on the episode involving *Kathakali* – the dance-drama form peculiar to Kerala – where it is both a reflection of the process by which local cultural forms and their producers are inserted into the global market (just like Roy's novel itself) and a 'set of choices about postcolonial identity' which involves a resistance to this process (pp. 82–4). We shall return to the implications of Tickell's arguments a little later.

In a similar vein, Needham (2005, p. 370) has suggested that Roy's novel is 'embedded in, and draws upon, larger intellectual – theoretical, cultural, political – currents that have acquired prominence in the contemporary historical moment'. In particular, Needham sees Roy's novel both as aligned with and critically distancing itself from the insights of the scholars generally associated with the subaltern studies school of historiography. For example, Needham sees Roy's focus on 'small' stories as opening a critical dialogue with one of the founding figures of the group, Ranajit Guha, and his important essay on the 'small voice of history'. Like Guha, Roy sees hegemonic narratives of history as a part of the life of the state and locates counter-narratives that resist this power in the lives and tales of the disenfranchised people who inhabit the borderlands of class, caste and gender – children, untouchables, divorced women who are denied economic or erotic agency. Yet Needham argues that unlike Guha, Roy does not assume any automatic continuity between women's and other class- and caste-marked 'small voices'. She attends to the specific dynamics of patriarchy: 'she is interested as well not only in the

conditions of the former's ["small voices"] emergence and development, but also in how these conditions do not uniformly yield the difference of the subaltern from the dominant' (Needham 2005, p. 380).

So, while Ammu's resistance to patriarchy is expressed in her fierce and unconditional commitment to her children and her 'untouchable' lover Velutha, Roy carefully draws other female figures such as Mammachi and Baby Kochamma who are not only incapable of resistance, but are committed to perfecting their victimhood by actively participating in the violent defence of patriarchal norms. For our purposes, it is crucial to note that it is to Roy's drawing on a variety of 'resources of story-telling in general, and the techniques of the realist novel in particular' that Needham attributes her sophisticated critique of patriarchy and revision of the 'small voice' thesis of the subaltern studies group (ibid.)

Finally, in an article of particular interest to us here, Susan Stanford Friedman argues that Roy's complex politics – 'on the one hand, unveiling the geopolitical structures of colonialism, postcolonialism, and multinationalism; on the other hand, turning a critical searchlight onto India's internal affairs' – is sustained by a particular strategy of organizing her narrative around a poetics of space (Friedman 2005, p. 201). Calling for a return to Bakhtin's understanding of *topo* as a 'co-constituent of narrative along with chronos', Friedman finds in Roy an exemplary practice of what she calls topochronic narrative poetics where the novel's discourse 'privileges space over time, tropes locations as "figures" on the grounds of time' (p. 197). Thus, in Roy's novel, spaces such as the Abhilash Talkies, the History House, the pickle factory and so on, make concrete the continuous histories of colonialism, globalization, class and caste conflicts: 'Rather than history containing space, different spaces in the novel contain history. The novel moves associationally in and out of these spaces, rather than sequentially in linear time, with each location stimulating different fragments of events' (p. 199).

Friedman's attention to the novel's spatialization of its own story is salutary. It draws our attention to the relationship between narrative style and the material reality that this style attempts to embody and mediate. It reorients our attention to history as a complex space-time continuum and encourages us to ask us about the relationship between this and the forms of literary and cultural acts. Friedman outlines the specific historical grounds of Roy's novel very briefly – highlighting Kerala's paradoxical mixture of high rates of literacy, welfare in the health and medical sectors, its stagnating economy, and poor record of land reform directed at the 'untouchable' castes. In what follows we will extend some of the lines of Friedman's argument in order to

see whether we can enrich the concept of what she (after Lawrence Grossberg) calls the novel's 'spatial materialism' by integrating the idea of the environment within it. Can what Friedman calls Roy's spatial poetics be the appropriate style of what we have been calling the environment of postcolonial India?

Be that as it may, both the novel's admirers and detractors agree on the fact that its narrative style – whether it is called 'mythic-realist' or 'topochronic' or 'critical realist' – lies at the heart of the effect it achieves. The signal feature of this style, as Ahmad outlines, is a disjunctive mixture of various realist, modernist and 'mythic' features. I have been suggesting that this uneven style embodies the specific historical unevenness of postcolonial India in general, and Kerala, the novel's chosen ground, in particular. Let us now briefly examine the contours of this ground.

'No language to do it in'

A contemporary global reality so complex and contradictory that it constantly threatens to overwhelm all available literary and linguistic forms – this is a theme that Roy has spoken of frequently. At the Hague, attending an international forum on water resources she claims to have witnessed:

> the ritualistic slaughter of language as I know and understand it … Every speech was percussive with phrases like 'women's empowerment', 'people's participation' and 'deepening democracy'. Yet it turned out that the whole purpose of the forum was to press for the privatization of the world's water.
>
> (2002, p. 33)

Equally, when thinking about describing contemporary India, Roy finds: 'Truly, literally, there's no language to do it in. This is the real horror of India. The orbits of the powerful and the powerless spinning further and further apart from each other, never intersecting, sharing nothing. Not a language. Not even a country' (pp. 36–7).

Roy is attentive to the specific elements of this global (and local) condition that challenges language – a condition of unevenness that throws together people apparently living in different eras. A walk home in Delhi shows her that: 'India lives in several centuries at the same time … In the lane behind my house, every night I walk past road-gangs of emaciated labourers digging a trench to lay fibre-optic cables to speed up our

digital revolution. In the bitter winter cold, they work by the light of a few candles' (pp. 167–8).

As a writer then, what concerns Roy is to find a language and a style that can help us imagine these simultaneous yet non-synchronized ways of being. Mimetic models developed in Europe will have to be, if not rejected out of hand, then stretched to new limits. Note how closely Roy's description of the contemporary condition of India echoes both Trotsky's understanding of combined and uneven development – 'a drawing together of the different stages of the journey, a combining of separate steps, an amalgam of archaic with more contemporary forms' – and Guha and Gadgil's analysis of the environmental unevenness of the country that we discussed earlier.

Neither can there be much doubt that Arundhati Roy is aware, not only of the unevenness of global material conditions, but also of the cultural conditions that coexist with them. She has written perceptively about the contemporary culture industry:

> We live and prosper in the heart of the marketplace. True, for every so-called success there are hundreds who 'fail'. True, there are a myriad art forms, both folk and classical, myriad languages, myriad cultural and artistic traditions that are being crushed and cast aside in the stampede to the big bumper sale in wonderland.
>
> (pp. 172–3)

But Roy cannot speak of historical or cultural conditions without speaking of the environmental. For her, these are truly interpenetrated categories. The state of democracy in India, for example, can only be assessed via analyses of the environmental impact of the projects such as the Narmada Dam:

> From being a fight over the fate of a river valley, it began to raise doubts about an entire political system. What is at issue now is the very nature of our democracy. Who owns this land? Who owns its rivers? Its forests? Its fish? These are huge questions. They are being taken hugely seriously by the state. They are being answered in one voice by every institution at its command … in bitter, brutal ways.
>
> (pp. 45–6)

For Roy, the relationship between a state and its citizens – I am tempted to say between the postcolonial state and its citizens – can be properly understood only when we have appreciated it as a matrix of contest

(profoundly unequal) for land, river, forests and fish. Indian cities, the much-trumpeted face of 'India Shining' or 'India Rising' (depending on whether one is listening to Indian right-wing nationalist propaganda or the BBC World Service) reveals itself more properly to Roy as the face of what Mike Davis calls the 'planet of slums':

> The great majority [of the displaced poor] is eventually absorbed into the slums on the periphery of our great cities, where it coalesces into an immense pool of cheap construction labour … true they're not being annihilated or taken to gas chambers, but I can warrant that the quality of their accommodation is worse than in any concentration camp of the Third Reich. They're not captive, but they redefine the meaning of liberty.
>
> (pp. 58–9)[2]

Of course, what is true of India here is also true of, say, Brazil, China, the Philippines, Indonesia, Kenya – in short, of the global south – and this is at the very least implied in Roy's analysis of the current dispensation. It seems to me that it may be possible to speak of this condition, where, to a virtually unprecedented degree (as a result of factors such as population distribution, demographics, recent colonial and imperial pasts, continuing neocolonial dynamics, and revolutionary technologies of extraction), the historical condition of unevenness is felt and lived as a toxic environmental condition, as the signature condition of postcoloniality itself. That is to say, a substantial intensification of the experience of the contemporary primarily as a traumatic material and bodily encounter with a hostile and degrading environment – this seems to separate the lives of the global majority (mostly living in Latin America, Africa and Asia) from that of the global minority (mostly living in or between Europe, north America and Australia). It would follow then, confirming the insights of Trotsky via Guha and Gadgil, that this condition of historical-environmental unevenness is the specific 'horizon' of the cultural forms produced in these areas.[3] This understanding then invites us to look more closely at the southern Indian state of Kerala, the 'ground' of Roy's novel.

Ayemenem and Ayamenem

Following Roy's winning of the Booker prize in 1997, the literary tourism industry in Kerala experienced a mini-boom. Local and international operators organized walking tours for tired and slightly bewildered

north American, European, Australian and some Asian and Indian tourists in the small town of Ayamenem – reputed to be the inspiration for Roy's Ayemenem in the novel. R. Krishnakumar, a reporter for the Indian magazine *Frontline*, produced a fascinating study of the contrasts and overlaps between the historical Ayamenem and Roy's fictional town:

> Across the river from Kollenkeril, beyond the Really Deep, one could not see the History House from the stone steps … The joint-venture Taj Garden Retreat at Kumarakom is a surprise on a mangrove swamp. It was a thatched double-storeyed country house built in 1877 by George Alfred Baker, who belonged to a family of the earliest Protestant missionaries to come to south India in 1737 … Today the thatched roof has been replaced by a tiled roof, and, as the novel describes it, the old colonial bungalow with its deep verandahs and Doric columns … is the centre-piece of an elaborate tourism complex … The Taj Group has sought Heritage Status for its about-to-be 22-room retreat on the lake, which borders the Kumarakom bird sanctuary. Nearby is another private tourism venture which has transplanted about 100 ancestral homes from many parts of the State.
>
> (1997, p. 110)

This mapping of the historical ground of Roy's novel shows how deeply Kerala – 'God's own country', according to its tourism advertisements – is marked both by colonial capital (the English rubber estate) and neocolonial global capital (the 'heritage' hotel site owned by one of India's leading multinational business groups). Rubber (along with coffee), one of the cash crops prioritized by the colonial government to maximize state revenue, contributed to the radical alteration of the ecological balance and livelihood of what Guha and Gadgil call 'ecosystem people' in southern India. The postcolonial state has sanctioned the continuing dispossession of those people and the misappropriation of resources by converting the former rubber estate to a site for an international hotel peddling images of 'traditional' Indian rural harmony and catering to the burgeoning 'eco-tourism' industry.

What is true of Ayamenem seems generally to be true of Kerala (although Kerala seems to have done better than most other Indian states in some respects, thanks partly to the protectionist measures implemented by its state administration). The landmark 1982 Citizen's Report on the Indian environment highlighted the case of the pollution of the Chaliyar river by the Mavoor unit of the Gwalior Rayons company

owned by another of India's leading industrial group – the Birlas. The rampant pollution of the river by untreated industrial chemical waste (including mercury) had serious adverse effects on the ecological health of an entire region and prompted a popular agitation that lasted from 1965–79 (Agarwal et al. 1982, pp. 26–7). The Kerala state government was finally forced to negotiate between the local citizens and the company, which, after 22 years, admitted to causing human and environmental damage, but got away with not having to undertake the appropriate compensatory actions. Similarly, the report picked Kerala out as having a particularly poor record in regard to its forests – the eco-system probably most viciously degraded in independent India. Between 1940 and 1970 Kerala diverted 3500 square kilometres of forest to 'non-forestry purposes' – including the building of dams, forming new agricultural land and opening up new industrial sites. By 1981, Kerala was amongst the top five states contributing to the massive Rs 464 crores national revenue from forestry (pp. 33–4). As a result, Kerala has seen a devastating loss of topsoil, heavy silting of its water resources, and an increasing number of landslides – processes contributing to internal rural migration, loss of livelihood and living space, adverse health problems, and degradation of ecosystems, particularly marine and freshwater.

It is this reality, one that percolates through every lived experience in Kerala (and, indeed, India in general) that informs Roy's novel. It demands not only the thematic inclusion of environment, but also formal and stylistic innovations that can accommodate such historical-environmental unevenness. That is to say, the novel must not only tell a story of a radically altered environment and its relationship with human beings (which it does), but it also has to be an environment in which this story can be told. So thematically, environment is named by Roy's novel as the matrix that enables the collective and individual behavioural logic of the characters. But in order to do this, Roy must stretch the novel's form and style and call upon 'the historical privilege of backwardness'; to this end she uses at least one significant 'archaic' cultural form available to her – Kerala's traditional dance-drama, the *Kathakali*. Thus, formally too, her choice of style and mode of narration themselves call to mind the historical-environmental unevenness of the chosen ground of her storytelling – Kerala.

'Ancestors whispering inside'

Although Roy's novel pays scrupulous attention to historically specific forms of injustice and oppression – colonialism, caste laws, 'globalization',

patriarchy – its core thematic concern may even be called trans-historical: 'civilization's fear of nature, men's fear of women, power's fear of powerlessness' (Roy 1997, p. 308). It is this psychosis of fear that is seen to regulate the regime of borders and classifications, the defiance of which brings brutal retribution on to the 'small' people of the novel – children, 'untouchables', divorced and 'single' women. This drama of loss, courage and brutality is particularized by Friedman's 'topochronic' narrative, where space operates both as an enabling frame and as a key to decoding the characters.

The theme of borders and border-crossings (some licensed and others transgressive) appears in the opening lines of the novel. The monsoon rains seem to dissolve Ayemenem's constitutive borders: 'Boundaries blur as tapioca fences take root and bloom … Pepper vines snake up electric poles. Wild creepers burst through laterite banks and spill across flooded roads. Boats ply in the bazaars. And small fish appear in puddles that fill the PWD potholes on the highways' (p. 1). This confused space, where the 'natural' and the 'cultural' run into one other, provides the precise environment and an interpretative handle for a reading of Rahel and her memories. Walking up to the house where she grew up, Rahel remembers her amorphous childhood where she and Estha, her dizygotic twin brother, routinely crossed the physical, bodily separation between them by sharing each other's consciousness. Rahel recalls waking up at night giggling at Estha's funny dreams, feeling his fear and humiliation while being sexually abused, tasting his sandwiches on the train ride that took him away from his mother and sister. Not only does Rahel's consciousness transcend the physical boundaries between the living, but also those between the living and the dead. She remembers the funeral of her English cousin, Sophie, when she alone could ignore the apparent finality of death and see that Sophie was actually awake, turning cartwheels in her coffin, showing Rahel the painted church ceiling and the baby bats suspended from it. Like Ayemenem in the rain, Rahel's consciousness is premised on the dissolution of all normative boundaries and separations. More than that, it is the particular environment of Ayemenem that enables this. The novel's opening prepares us to read the other 'small' people of the novel – Estha, Ammu, Velutha – as having this in common with Rahel: that they are all compelled to cross normative boundaries within the specific environment of Kerala in the late 1960s and suffer, to varying degrees, grievous losses for it.

Crucially, the environment of the novel is always more than the monsoonal rains. It is also composed of human material and cultural practices that are expressed in the very fabric of the sites that the people

inhabit. Roy provides three startling examples of this in the form of the three houses that the 'small' people move in and out of. Each of these houses simultaneously frames the regime of boundaries and classification and the gestures that transgress them. Take, for example, the abandoned rubber plantation house across the river that Rahel and Estha call the History House. The children light upon this name while listening to their uncle Chacko's Walter Benjamin-like meditation on human, and specifically postcolonial, alienation from history. As Chacko describes history as a house of many rooms, lit by lamps at night, filled with the whispers of ancestors, the children ground this metaphor by imagining it to be the house that was once owned by an Englishman and is now rumoured to be inhabited by his ghost. Their transferring of Chacko's metaphor to the material of history is uncannily accurate both because of what the History House *stands for* and because of what it *stands on*. Built for the colonial profit-making exercise that was the nineteenth-century rubber cultivation in Kerala, it historicizes Chacko's analysis of postcolonial alienation – 'And we cannot understand the whispering, because our minds have been invaded by a war … A war that captures dreams and re-dreams them. A war that has made us adore our conquerors and despise ourselves' (p. 53). Ancestral whispers are rendered incomprehensible because they remain captured within a space that is both a means and a product of the war of despoliation called colonialism. But the whispers are also alluring, because they speak of a scandal, a scandal of border-crossing – for the History House belonged to Kari Saipu, the Englishman who had 'gone native'. Like the exemplar of this kind of scandalous border-crossing, Joseph Conrad's Kurtz (a comparison deliberately underscored by Roy), Kari Saipu crossed all kinds of borders enforced by the system he served – racial/cultural (by speaking and dressing like a Malyali) and sexual (by taking a young Malyali boy as his lover). He killed himself when his pubescent lover was taken away from him. As a former rubber plantation, then, the History House speaks of the war that colonized Indian minds and bodies. On the other hand, as a haunted house that speaks of sexual and cultural scandals, it is also a site that holds out the possibilities of flouting the very rules that sustained this kind of colonization. It is appropriate then, that it is in the History House that the postcolonial drama of transgression and enforcement is staged. Ammu and Velutha meet there at night to break the love laws that patrol caste boundaries. The children escape there to seek shelter from the dreadful fallout of the discovery of Ammu and Velutha's transgression. Their cousin Sophie accidentally drowns during their escape. The police – inheritors and keepers of the flame of colonial

order in independent India – trace the children to their hideout, and discover Velutha there. Their slow, methodical torture of Velutha is described as 'History in Live Performance'.

> If they hurt Velutha more than they intended to, it was only because any kinship, any connection between themselves and him, any implication that if nothing else, at least biologically he was a fellow creature – had been severed long ago … they were not battling an epidemic. They were merely inoculating a community against an outbreak.
>
> (p. 309)

For this dialectics between the reinforcement and transgression of borders, the History House is the site par excellence.

Similarly, the Ipe's house in Ayemenem physically expresses and produces the apartheid logic of patriarchy and colonialism. Built by the male head of a family favoured by the colonial regime in the nineteenth century for both their class and cultural prestige (they own considerable amounts of land and are Christians who host the 'soft' power of colonialism manifested in the missionaries), the house is a crucial part of an environment that endows a degrading subjectivity on the 'small people' who come within its ambit. The mood it radiates is that of the world-weary patriarch: 'Like an old man with rheumy eyes watching children play, seeing only transience in their shrill elation and their whole-hearted commitment to life.' Its physical form is dedicated to the stifling of all expressions of life for the benefit and preservation of the male line. So, its architecture splits and disembodies women: 'The doors had not two, but four shutters of panelled teak so that in the old days, ladies could keep the bottom half closed, lean their elbows on the ledge and bargain with visiting vendors without betraying themselves below the waist' (p. 165). At the same time, it enables the smooth and discrete flow of female services, including sexual services, to satisfy the 'manly needs' of the male heirs while maintaining the codes of respectability:

> Mammachi had a separate entrance built for Chacko's room, which was at the eastern end of the house, so that the objects of his 'Needs' wouldn't have to go traipsing through the house. She secretly slipped them money to keep them happy. They took it because they needed it. They had young children and old parents.
>
> (p. 169)

The past and the present here are paradoxically linked through the spatial division of the house that ensures the continuity of patriarchal privileges. The location of the Ayemenem house also speaks of the continuities between old and new colonialisms. Like the History House, it is supported by lands and rubber plantations purchased during the nineteenth century which contributed to the economy of British colonialism and confirmed the power of the *compradore* classes. In the new world of post-independence India, it houses Chacko's pickle factory (wrested and expanded from Mammachi's more modest local enterprise) which seeks to be a small part of the national effort to integrate the country into a globalized economy. The logo of Paradise Pickles and by extension, that of the Ayemenem house, is now a crudely painted *Kathakali* dancer with the legend 'emperors of the realm of taste' emblazoned beside it. Its products represent the commodification of exotic regional flavours for international markets, and as such it constitutes itself as the latest avatar of the old colonial logic of wealth circulation.

In contrast, Roy gives us a glimpse of a 'small house' that speaks of a distinct environment and a habitation that opposes the politics of 'largeness'. This is the house of Velutha, the 'untouchable' friend of the children and, fatally, the lover of their mother. Unlike the Ayemenem house or the History House's spatial expression of the logic of apartheid, Velutha's hut speaks of and enables practices of integration, inclusion and equity. Next to the river and hemmed in by a huddle of trees, 'it nestled close to the ground, as though it was listening to a whispered subterranean secret'. But this is no Indian Walden, or the site of some idyllic Thoreau-like expression of a 'natural' retreat. It contains two maimed beings – Velutha's paralysed brother Kuttappen, and their half-blind father, Vellya Paapen. Kuttappen and Vellya Paapen's mutilations are the direct result of the ways in which their physical labour was extracted during and after colonialism. Vellya Paapen lost his sight to a stray stone chip while working under typically gruelling conditions and Kuttappen lost the use of his legs in a workplace accident when he fell out of a tree. The hut is a physical expression of such tragedies – the first thing one sees on entering is the white plastic bottle and tube that collects the immobile Kuttappen's urine. It is decorated with things salvaged from the rubbish bins of the Ayemenem house – a broken clock, discarded biscuit tins, tacky posters – which express both the tenacity and the degradation of its occupants' destitute lives.

Yet the hut is also marked by a complete lack of the kind of regulatory regime that dictates the lives of the inhabitants of the Ayemenem house. Inside, it is dark but clean, smelling of the children's favourite

fish curry and wood smoke. There are no keys or cupboards to lock. A small door leads to a courtyard where Velutha does his carpentry. The family hen comes in and out of this door. The space is redolent of an intimate flow between work and life. Indeed, this is where the children take their secret boat and repair it with the help of Velutha, united in a moment of complete absorption in their common labour: 'The sandpaper was divided into exactly equal halves, and the twins fell to work with an eerie concentration that excluded everything else. Boat-dust flew around the room and settled on hair and eyebrows. On Kuttappen like a cloud, on Jesus like an offering' (p. 213).

Velutha's hut then, speaks of and produces the mixture of degradation, dignity and defiance that characterizes Velutha himself. The maimed human beings it shelters and the cast-off rubbish with which it is decorated are consistent with the logic of the world outside the hut where the 'untouchables' are brutally marginalized by a thoroughly efficient economic and cultural regime. But its spatial logic also produces a solidarity that defies such regimes. It produces the dignity of Velutha and shows why he, despite the volume and strength of insurmountable prejudice, could momentarily break out of the enforced ghettoes of 'untouchability'. The carpentry station and tools testify to the skills that got him noticed, first by Mammachi and then by a German carpenter visiting a local mission. It is his experience as a carpenter and as a skilled mechanic that made Velutha a prized worker at Chacko's pickle factory. This in turn, led to the growth of his political sensibilities, his joining of the local communist party, and his deep but fierce commitment to the fight against the forces of privilege. The room in his hut, bringing together all visitors and inhabitants in an equitable embrace, expresses and enables Velutha's sensibility.

Ultimately, of course, it is the 'big' houses and their regulatory regimes that succeed in snuffing out the spirit of Velutha's house. Velutha and Ammu pay for their transgressions with their lingering painful deaths in spaces of confinement and torture. The police cell where Velutha dies, naked, broken and smeared in his own filth makes concrete a specific kind of power and its frightful capacities:

> Someone switched on the light. Bright. Blinding. Velutha appeared on the scummy, slippery floor. A mangled genie invoked by a modern lamp. He was naked, his soiled mundu had come undone … Police boots stepped back from the rim of a pool of urine spreading from him, the bright, bare electric bulb reflected it.
>
> (pp. 319–20)

Unlike Velutha's hut, the police cell is not dark. But it can only illuminate an inhumane modernity. Ammu, too, dies alone – a castaway on the double grounds of sexual transgression and economic marginalization. Expelled from her house by her brother, separated from her children, ill and desperately looking for any job that would enable her to try and get them back, she is in a grimy room in a nondescript hotel on the eve of an interview for the position of a secretary. At night, in her dreams, the cramped room becomes populated with nightmarish policemen with scissors who hack off all her hair, a traditional practice of 'naming and shaming' prostitutes in Kerala. She dies gripped in a state of fear similar to that experienced by Velutha, if not physically broken in the same manner – 'She didn't know where she was, she recognized nothing around her. Only her fear was familiar … This time the steely fist never loosened its grip. Shadows gathered like bats in the steep hollows near her collarbone' (pp. 161–2).

These houses and cells are intricately specified spaces that define the nodal points at which the natural and the cultural continuities of environment become visible. Roy carefully outlines the political and economic forces – colonial, postcolonial or neo-colonial – that shape this environment; typically through an account of the kind of labour and the kind of wealth that is produced, circulated and appropriated. Thus, it is never possible to read the environment in this novel – be it concretized in monsoons, trees, rubber plantations, cities, rivers and so on – as standing outside or beyond the processes of history. It is never the background, or mere thematic prop to the human story. Rather, environment is at once the code that helps us to read and understand the specific histories of the characters and the force that produces and reproduces the historical conditions that are expressed through those character's actions. It is this understanding that sharpens the novel's critique of the contemporary Indian dispensation.

If the story of Pappachi, Mammachi and the Ayemenem house tells of the colonial organization of life, the tragic events of 1969 that involve the children, Ammu, Velutha, Chacko, Margaret and Sophie are equally eloquent expressions of the postcolonial life of a still relatively newly independent nation. With Estha and Rahel's return in 1991, we are ushered into the next stage of Kerala and India's development in the era of the post-Fordist global capitalism often crudely known as 'globalization' (as if this had not always been the tendency of historical capital over the past five or six hundred years). Within and outside India, the neo-liberal mantra endlessly circulated without much critical analysis presents this as a kind of utopian border-crossing available to all the

citizens of the world who sign up to its prescription of 'structural adjustments' and the corporatization of economic and political processes. Roy's novel punctures this myth by showing it to be a continuation of the despoliation and degradation of the Indian environment and peoples that had accelerated under colonialism and has now taken on an unprecedented velocity. The rhetoric of effortless border-crossing is shown to reinforce the age-old borders that shut out the smell of poverty from the sensitive noses of the privileged. Globalization wafts out of the dying river Meenachal, encrusted with filth and pesticide bought with World Bank loans: 'Most of the fish had died. The ones that survived suffered from fin-rot and had broken out in boils.' Globalization enforces a spatial unevenness where 'Gulf-money houses built by nurses, masons, wire-benders and bank clerks who worked hard and unhappily in faraway places' jostled against older 'resentful houses tinged green with envy' (p. 13). Globalization converts the History House into a five-star international leisure complex attracting international tourists eager to sample the delights of 'traditional' Kerala – a 'tradition' now manufactured by transplanting old family houses around Kari Saipu's bungalow to make a 'Heritage Hotel' criss-crossed by artificial canals and toy boats. The entire angle of this reinvented History House is thrust towards the logic of apartheid – the hotel guests arrive not through Ayemenem, but are ferried straight from Cochin on speedboats along a route that is carefully designed to deny them a glimpse of the people who live there. Once there, they are walled off from the river and the town:

> The view from the hotel was beautiful, but here too the water was thick and toxic. *No Swimming* signs had been put up in stylish calligraphy. They had built a tall wall to screen off the slum and prevent in from encroaching on Kari Saipu's estate. There wasn't much they could do about the smell.
>
> (p. 125)

In keeping with Roy's understanding of what environment is, the environmental degradation that globalization brings has its logical extension in human and cultural degradation. As the hotel guests loll around the pools and enjoy sublimated sexual games, they are treated to *Kathakali* dance performances where 'ancient stories were collapsed and amputated. Six-hour classics were slashed to twenty-minute cameos.' That this cultural amputation also leads to the drastic diminution

of the human is seen in how the dancers themselves feel: 'On their way back from the Heart of Darkness, they stopped at the temple to ask the pardon of their gods. To apologize for corrupting their stories. For encashing their identities. Misappropriating their lives' (p. 229).

Globalization climbs out of the ether and into the satellite dishes that have mushroomed all over Ayemenem. The colonization of minds that Chacko had spoken about in the 1960s is now performed through the agencies of American soap operas, wrestling and fashion shows. This worlding has a literally paralysing effect on Ayemenem as seen most spectacularly in the case of Baby Kochamma. As she is gradually hypnotized by the spectacle of 'Blondes, wars, famines, football, sex, music … whole wars, famines, picturesque massacres and Bill Clinton', she passes into an increasingly immobile senility. Her physical corpulence is heightened by the make-up and jewellery she takes to wearing in a hideous parody (and imitation) of a vanished youth. The very size and shape of the satellite dish that is the conduit for this globalization is a reminder of the structural inequality that is its hallmark – 'It *looked* large enough for people to live in. Certainly it was bigger than a lot of people's homes. Bigger, for instance, than Kochu Maria's cramped quarters' (p. 188). Baby Kochmma and her servant Kochu Maria may seem united in their mutual partaking of television's worldly delights, but the very shape of the conduit of this globalization underscores the distance between them. We again see its divisive logic in another scene of arrival – in the airport where scores of Indian workers who form the backbone of the remittance economy of Kerala return from their joyless overseas workplaces to be reunited with their families:

> And there they were, the Foreign Returnees, in wash'n'wear suits and rainbow sunglasses. With an end to grinding poverty in their Aristocrat suitcases. With cement roofs for their thatched houses … With love and a lick of shame that their families were so so … so … gawkish. *Look at the way they dressed! Surely they had more suitable airport wear! Why did the Malayalees have such awful theeth?*
>
> (p. 140)

Border-crossing here produces and is a production of a process of division, alienation and degradation. It takes place in the context of an environment which is always characterized by signs of decay

A great merit of Roy's novel is that it refuses to corral the debilitating effects of globalization exclusively within postcolonial spaces. Rahel's sojourn in Washington helps reveal the global scale of degradation that

globalization achieves. We see that America is not the nirvana in which the dreams of globalization are lived by the blessed ones, but an ordinary, broken space infested with ordinary nightmares. Rahel compares Ayemenem to Washington during one of her walks:

> *Around now*, Rahel thought, *if this were Washington, I would be on my way to work. The bus ride. The streetlights. The gas fumes … The clatter of coins pushed towards me in the metal tray. The smell of money on my fingers. The punctual drunk with sober eyes who arrives exactly at 10 p.m.: 'Hey, you! Black bitch! Suck my dick!'*
>
> (p. 187)

Global television brings the spectacle of global war to the small people. On Baby Kochamma's television set we can see American policemen handcuffing a bloodied teenager, watched by his fearful and wasted mother. The boy screams 'I'm fifteen years old and I wish I were a better person than I am. But I'm not. Do you want to hear my pathetic story?' at the camera that strips him of all his dignity even as it turns him into a commodity for consumption by a global audience. Rahel in Washington and the unnamed young victim of American state brutality are joined in the novel by Velutha, by the insane Muralidharan, Kuttappen and the women workers in Chacko's factory to form a truly global army of the destitute and the broken. The unevenness of globalization blights the whole world, but each blighted corner of this world has a specific story to tell.

The systemic logic of victimization and oppression is expressed in the individual environment that Roy scrupulously builds around each character. Baby Kochamma's garden, for example, is a perfect expression of her lost hopes and a mind crushed by the patriarchal codes of civility, religion and respectability. Her desire for control and agency, as a compensation for what is denied to her, shapes the dwarf hedges, the gargoyles, and the rigid order of mottled black or blood-red flowers. Her labour in the garden is an attempt to control space and other forms of life just as she herself has been controlled: 'Like a lion-tamer she tamed twisting vines and nurtured bristling cacti. She limited bonsai plants and pampered rare orchids. She waged war on the weather. She tried to grow edelweiss and Chinese guava' (pp. 26–7). As with all of Roy's spaces, this garden is an environment that is simultaneously produced and productive. Its physical form is dictated by Baby Kochamma's needs, but the more she labours on it the more she internalizes its logic of regimentation, and her furious reaction to Ammu's affair and her

poisonous attempts to control Estha and Rahel replicate her relationship to her garden (and later, her television). Similarly, the Orangedrink Lemondrink man's brutal sexual attack on Estha takes place in the Abhilash Talkies, the cinema hall that peddles sublimated sexual dreams through 'world hits' such as *The Sound of Music*. As he forces Estha to masturbate him, the soda-seller quizzes him about his family, the rhythm of the masturbation increasing with Estha's revelations about his belonging to an elite, land-holding, factory-owning family. The class resentment that finds expression in this act of abuse has specific local connotations, but it is also conditioned by the space of the cinema hall, which taunts the casual labourers who service it with unreachable dreams of global bliss enjoyed by rich blondes in their alpine palaces.

Conversely, the rebellious gestures of the 'small people' can only take place within enabling environments. Velutha's hut we have already looked at. The episode of the *Kathakali* dancers provide us with another example of an enabling, historicized environment. After degrading themselves for money in front of the tourists at the Heritage Hotel, the dancers return to a temple for an expiatory performance. Unlike the hotel, the temple is not a part of the global circuit of commodified regional exotica, and hence lacks its gleam – 'everything was white-walled, moss-tiled and moonlit. Everything smelled of the recent rain.' A thin priest lies curled up in a corner, and the old temple elephant sleeps beside a steaming pile of its own dung. But it is precisely this site of what Raymond Williams would call residual culture where the dancers can stage their counter-performance, one that does not cater to the tourist's short attention span, that cannot be exchanged for dollars, that tells the ancient epics and great stories through the idiom of twitching muscles, impossible leaps and blurs of movement. Roy describes the relationship between this art and the artists in both spatial and temporal terms – the stories are the houses that the dancer lives in; they are his children as well as his childhood (pp. 229–30). Within the space of the temple, outside (however temporarily) the reaches of global capital, he can inhabit his stories properly: 'This story is the safety net above which he swoops and dives like a brilliant clown in a bankrupt circus … It is his colour and his light. It is the vessel into which he pours himself. It gives him shape. Structure. It harnesses him. It contains him' (p. 231). The dancer is fused with the dance, or as Roy puts it, his body becomes his soul. Like Velutha and the children repairing the boat in Velutha's courtyard, labour here is non-alienated, restoring a moment of dignity to the labourer albeit within a certain environment and a certain space. It is the hut or the decaying temple discarded by the Midas touch of

global development where this kind of redemption is still available. But, like all redemption, this can only confer momentary grace. Roy's is too acute an eye to produce a vision of untainted tradition that can be juxtaposed to some upstart globalized modernity. The tradition embodied in the labour of the *Kathakali* dancers is also, as the Love Laws tell us, one of violent inequity. The ancient epics they dance are saturated with patriarchal violence. And at dawn, after their dance is over, the men take their make-up off and go home to beat their wives.

Environment, in Roy's novel, is a fusion of the natural and the cultural that is painstakingly historicized, frequently through accounts of modes of labour. It acquires thematic importance as both expression and productive condition of the action of the characters. But this historicized environment, one that is particular to colonial and postcolonial uneven development, also enters the formal shaping of the novel. It is to this that we now turn.

'His body is his soul'

Our use of the environmental key provided by Roy decisively alters the register in which the novel can be read. For example, what appeared to be primarily a tale of tragic cross-caste romance and loss of childhood innocence (in other words, the story of Estha, Rahel, Ammu and Velutha) can now be read as a tale of dispossession of a different kind where Velutha assumes a central role. His institutionalized marginalization can now be seen as a consequence of his being caught at a transit point between the categories of what Guha calls 'ecosystem people' and 'ecorefugees'. With globalization literally poisoning the river Meenacahal, people such as Velutha have to sever their symbiotic relationship with it and increasingly take up casual employment in small-scale urban enterprises like Chacko's. As such, they are at the point of leaving their degrading feudal relationship with the traditional ruling classes, and are about to enter into an (equally degrading) relationship with the 'new' elites. Thus, we can no longer read Velutha's doomed romance with Ammu as merely another click in the traditional cycle of Indian caste violence. Instead, the dynamics of caste is revealed to us as unequal competition for resources in a regime of development that effectively entrenches the marginalization of the oppressed. Ammu and Velutha's romance is a protest (however limited) against this historical process.

But here I would like to turn to the question of how this story can be told, which is another way of asking how the postcolonial novel form embodies this historical-environmental condition of unevenness. I want

to cast another, longer, look at the episode of the *Kathakali* dancers we touched upon earlier, Roy enters into a meta-fictional discussion even as Estha and Rahel, now adults, come face to face with each other in the temple where the dancers perform. As the twins watch each other and the dance, the narrator zooms in on the main actor, the *Kathakali* man – whose traditional livelihood is now threatened by the ever-expanding forest of satellite television antennae:

> To the Kathakali Man these stories are his children and his childhood. He has grown up with them. They are the house he was raised in, the meadows he played in. They are his windows and his way of seeing. So when he tells a story, he handles it as he would a child of his own … The Kathakali Man is the most beautiful of men. Because his body is his soul.
>
> (pp. 229–30)

We have already discussed how the material environment of the temple enables the dancers to perform a labour that is a protest against the globalization that commodifies them and their art. Such performative fusion may remain beyond the scope of Roy, who, at least in her incarnation as a novelist, is firmly embedded within the circuits of the global flow of cultural capital (the Booker prize, the exoticized and eminently marketable 'Indian novel in English' and so on). Her narrative, however, can absorb some of the archaic generic codes of *Kathakali*.

In his history of the *Kathakali* dance-drama, Phillip Zarelli (2000) traces the development of this art form from the seventeenth century onwards. He shows how various formal mutations within the *Kathakali* genre embodied the social, political and environmental realities that enveloped it. In particular, his later chapters offer a fascinating study of how specific performative gestures were altered or new gestures created in response to drastic environmental changes in postcolonial and, more recently, globalized India. From Zarelli's discussion of the basic stylistic and formal aspects of the *Kathakali* dance-drama, I pick out three as being important to Roy's novel – those pertaining to the temporality, levels and sources of narration.

The striking thing about the discrepancy between the text and the performance of *Kathakali*, Zarelli says, is the lack of any linear chronological development (p. 40). This deliberate refusal of a linear progression in the chronology and sequence of the story is performed by a complex narrative arrangement: 'the narrative sections of the text set in third-person, usually composed in Sanskrit metrical verses known as *sloka* (or the

slightly different form known as *dandaka)*' and the first-person dialogue and soliloquy passages (*padam*) 'composed in a mixture of Sanskrit and Malayalam as dance music for delivery and interpretation by the actors'. Descriptive passages link sets of poetic images that clarify the main themes and the narrative and dialogue are set to specific musical modes (p. 41). Further, the delivery of the dialogues themselves demands a close collaboration between the actors and the singer:

> in the first delivery of the line, as the vocalists sing the line through, the actor enacts what might be called the 'subtext' of the line; in the second delivery of the line, as the actor 'speaks' each word of the line in gesture-language, the vocalists sing the line over and over again through a set number of rhythmic cycles.
>
> (p. 45)

The combination of non-linear chronology and complex, interactive and multiple narratorial levels have a direct effect on the characters in the *Kathakali* stories. As Zarelli puts it – 'The "character" is always there but, simultaneously, can also be temporally put in "parenthesis" in the sense that the character is "set aside" from time to time … In this structural sense, a *kathakali* performance is not attempting to create the "illusion of reality" happening in "real time"' (p. 88). In other words, what is eschewed by *Kathakali* dance-drama is the principle of classical realism.

As an Indian novelist working within the global market of English-language fiction, Roy may seem to be located at the very opposite of a local art form like *Kathakali* and its practitioners, however they might run the risk of incorporation within that same market. Yet it is striking how, in their discussions of the novel's formal and stylistic unevenness, critics have picked up the very qualities that appear to be central to *Kathakali's* art – multiple and shifting narrative levels, non-linear chronology and characters that refuse to be assimilated into a production of 'an illusion of reality in real time'. And indeed, there are passages in the novel that seem explicitly to borrow *Kathakali* narrative techniques:

> *Finish the drink.*
> *Watch the picture.*
> *Think of all the poor people.*
> *Lucky rich boy with porketmunny. No worries*
> Estha sat up and watched. His stomach heaved. He had a greenwavy, thick-watery, lumpy, seaweedy, floaty, bottomless-bottomful feeling…

> Past the Audience again (legs thiswayandthat). Last time to sing. This time to try and vomit. Exit through the EXIT.
>
> (Roy 1997, p. 107)

What is the chorus of disembodied voices at the beginning of this episode but the *Kathakali* musicians setting the 'background' that will excavate the deeper meanings that lie behind the character's actions? The interaction of the mother-child dialogue with a third-personal narrative position that is simultaneously the child's, his twin's and omniscient replicates the *Kathakali* technique of harmonizing the *padam* and the *sloka*. Even the linguistic innovations remind us of the interplay between the vernacular Malayalam and the classical Sanskrit in *Kathakali* recitations. The result of these stylistic moves for Roy's novel, as in *Kathakali* performances, is a refusal of the illusion of reality happening in real time, that is to say, as Ahmad noted, a stretching of the form of the realist novel. Roy uses the *Kathakali* episode at simultaneously thematic and formal levels. At the level of theme, the dance performance names a protest against the blind neo-colonial forces of globalization that ruthlessly commodify all forces of life in contemporary Kerala and India. In respect to the plot, it is the occasion of the twins coming face to face, after years of worldly roaming, on their native ground to achieve a measure of redemption. At the level of form, *Kathakali* is the archaic form that fuses with that of the contemporary novel, enabling it to embody the material reality of postcolonial environment. The stylistic and formal unevenness of Roy's novel emerges as the appropriate environment in which this story of dispossession of the 'small' people can be narrated. The postcolonial novel emerges as the form of historical uneven development.

Clearly, there is nothing new about observations on generic and stylistic unevenness, discontinuities and the open-ended nature of postcolonial or indeed any other literary and cultural genre. As Derrida puts it 'a text would not *belong* to any genre. Every text participates in one or several genres, there is no genreless text, there is always a genre and genres, yet such participation never amounts to belonging' (1980, p. 230). And if texts always participate in several generic codes, the novel form in particular, as Bakhtin pointed out long ago, is particularly adept at absorbing various kinds of cultural forms, genres and voices in order to trigger its reality effect (1981, p. 263). If the amalgamated framework of combined and uneven development and social ecology enabled us to do no more than detect Roy's novel's absorption of, say, the generic techniques of *Kathakali*, it would only be confirming

established genre theories and narratologies. However, I believe that an environmental-historical approach to Roy's novel focuses our attention on the conditions under which genres mutate, cultural forms absorb each other's generic codes, and forms such as the novel are able to absorb other cultural voices. It suggests that it is not enough to place Cesaire's 'marvellous real' or Rushdie's 'chutnification' or Roy's 'uneven realism' against, say, the political events of the twentieth-century Caribbean and a globalized postcolonial India. We have to look at how these styles and forms themselves reproduce the material environment of historical unevenness within which these stories can be told. So, if we observe that the use of prolepses and analepses by Roy increases the discrepancies between the story order and text order, what Genette calls 'anachronies' or the loosening of the relationship between the 'first narrative' and the 'second narrative', we must both analyse how the novel does it by absorbing *Kathakali* techniques and by determining what historical conditions permit or compel such a move (Genette 1980, p. 48). It is in the framing of these conditions that the environment, always understood as a continuous and complex flow between the human and the non-human, enters as an irreplaceable category.

5
Water/Land: Amitav Ghosh

The forests of beauty

On the southern tip of West Bengal in eastern India, just south of Calcutta, the great river Ganges fans out into many tributaries over a vast delta before ending a journey that began in the distant Himalayan north with a plunge into the Bay of Bengal. The mouth of this delta is made up of about three hundred small islands, spread over an area of about ten thousand square kilometres and straddling India's border with Bangladesh. It is one of those areas of the world where the lie of the land mocks the absurdity of international treaties, because it is virtually impossible to enforce border laws on a territory that constantly shifts, submerges and resurfaces with the ebb and flow of the tide. Most of these islands support mangrove trees. Bands of hardy impoverished humans inhabit some of them and, officially, they are home to around six hundred 'Royal Bengal' tigers – India's national animal and a desperately endangered species (Jalais 2005, pp. 1759–60). These are the *Sundarbans* – the forests of beauty.

The *Sundarbans* of majestic tigers and mysterious mangrove forests have long secured their place on the posters of global conservationist organizations such as the World Wildlife Fund (WWF). The other *Sundarbans* – the *Sundarbans* of unremitting poverty, human and non-human immiseration, government neglect and oppression; an area that has earned the name '*Kolkatar Jhi'* or 'Calcutta's servant' because of the sheer numbers that migrate to the metropolis to find employment as domestic labourers – are less familiar (ibid.) Throughout 1978 a curious scene played itself out on one of these *Sundarban* islands, called Marichjhapi. A trickle of Bangladeshi refugees started arriving on this hitherto uninhabited piece of land, a trickle that had swelled to around

30,000 people before the year was out. People shuttling across the porous deltaic border between India and Bangladesh was hardly a new phenomenon. The interesting aspect of this particular migration was that the people were arriving not from the east, from the direction of Bangladesh, but after many days and months of desperate journey, from the west, from central India. Who were these Marichjhapi refugees and why had they come?

Nineteen seventy-eight was a momentous and turbulent year in West Bengal, as a Left Front government, headed by the Communist Party of India, overwhelmingly won the popular vote and took charge of the state. One of the issues that the new administration immediately faced was that of the refugees from Bangladesh. The numbers of Bangladeshi arriving in West Bengal had risen sharply in the mid-1970s, following an explicit communalization of politics in Bangladesh, which had wrested its independence from Pakistan only a few years earlier. Calcutta, and its surrounding areas, were a natural destination for these destitute people, not only because they had some prospects of jobs and shelter in and around the city, but also because large parts of the metropolis itself (especially its southern suburbs) had been built and settled by earlier bands of largely Hindu refugees who had arrived during the traumatic events of the partition of India during the decolonization of 1947. The refugees of the 1970s hoped to find support on the basis of religious, language and often kinship ties amongst these residents of Calcutta (Mallick 1999, p. 105). Yet, they found themselves subject to an entirely hostile reaction.

Throughout the 1970s, before the communists came to power, the nationalist Congress administration of West Bengal had refused to accommodate these refugees and transported them to what were effectively prison camps in the neighbouring states of Orissa and Bihar, and even as far as the central Indian state of Madhya Pradesh. There, abandoned on parched wastelands, surrounded by hostile local people, and in appalling living conditions, they began to suffer and die in great numbers. Ross Mallick and Annu Jalais have argued that the roots of this official Bengali hostility to the refugees lay in the past colonial caste and class politics. The refugees of the 1970s mostly belonged to the low *namasudra* Hindu caste. In pre-1947 (colonial and unified) Bengal, and especially throughout the 1920s and 1930s, they and their ancestors had formed a powerful political movement in alliance with the Muslims that challenged the power of the Hindu high-caste dominated Indian National Congress Party which was leading the bid for Indian independence. One of the reasons that the Congress agreed

to the partition of Bengal in 1947 was to contain this lower-caste and Muslim challenge to its privileges – the hope was that the troublemakers would now be confined to a province of Pakistan rather than continuing to challenge the new Indian dispensation (Mallick 1999, pp. 105–6; Jalais 2005, p. 1757). Caste wars throw long and bitter shadows. The *bhadraloks* ('gentlemen') who ran the Bengal Congress party in the 1970s remembered the politically educated nature of the *namasudra* only too well, and did not want them anywhere near their seats of power. However, the Bengali communists – then the chief opposition party – saw that the refugee issue could be exploited as potential political capital and strongly agitated for their return to West Bengal and for the restoration of their civic rights. And that is why, after winning the elections in 1978, they suddenly found that the refugees had taken them at their word and had trekked en masse from their far-flung and squalid central Indian camps, to the *Sundarbans,* where they had heard there was land to settle on.

The approximately thirty thousand refugees who had arrived at the mud flats of Marichjhapi, however, quickly discovered that the Communist Party in power was a different beast to that which had fought for their cause while in opposition. It is difficult to identify one clear factor behind the Left Front government's fast and vicious reversal of its line on the refugees after it was elected in 1978. It is true that the island had been cleared by the previous state administration in 1975 and that some 'commercial trees' such as tamarisk and coconut had been planted there to increase revenue. Yet, the refugees were hardly a threat to these plants and by all accounts, in the few short months of their existence there, had added to the island's potential and value by building dams, establishing small-scale fisheries, carving out some vegetable plots and farming land. In any case, the government's official reason for its opposition to the settlers on Marichjhapi was that they had broken forest preservation laws and trespassed into the habitat of the endangered tigers. Even after nearly three decades, the survivors of Marichjhapi remain puzzled by this reasoning – Marichjhapi was not even a part of the officially declared 'tiger reserve zone' (Jalais 2005, p. 1760). Clearly, the Left Front government – purportedly the mouthpiece of the poor and the disenfranchised – remained under the influence of the Hindu caste and class politics of Bengal. With the party leadership still dominated by high-caste and upper-class Bengali *bhadraloks,* perhaps it saw the refugees' attempts to 'forge a new respectable identity for themselves as well as a bid to reclaim a portion of the West Bengali political rostrum by the poorest and most

marginalised' as a reincarnation of the radical *namasudra* politics that threatened 'gentlemen' everywhere (Jalasi 2005, p. 1759). What is clear, nonetheless, was that not for the first time, 'deep green' conservationist slogans ('save the pristine *Sundarbans* and the tigers from refugee poachers') were being invoked to engineer a political and environmental crisis.

The tragedy that unfolded in Marichjhapi from January to May 1979, when the refugees decided to take on the state government by asserting their right to stay, can be clearly outlined if inadequately captured. On 27 January 1979, the government banned all movements into and out of Marichjhapi under the Forest Preservation Act and Section 144 of the Criminal Penal Code, in an effort to starve the islanders into submission. The refugees, with the help of some of their supporters in Calcutta, appealed against the ban to the Calcutta High Court, which ruled against the government's interference in the refugees' movements and in their access to food and water. Paying no attention to this, the government continued the blockade until 14 May, when finding the islanders unbowed, it ordered policemen (both in and out of uniform), party cadres and hired criminals to 'forcibly evict' them. This paramilitary force moved in on Marichjhapi, systematically raping, killing and burning houses over a period of forty-eight hours (Mallick 1999, pp. 108–12). There is no agreement to how many lives were lost in Marichjhapi between 14–16 May. Most of the bodies were burnt or thrown in the rivers, and census data about the refugees both before and after the massacre are unreliable. Estimates vary between five and fifteen thousand. After the 'cleansing', the government settled some of its own supporters on the same land where so much human blood had been shed in the name of forest and animal preservation.

Tigers, in whose name the massacre at Marichjhapi was committed, continue to dominate the memories of the survivors. The way in which they do so, however, offers us quite a different perspective on the 'environmental' argument to the one posited by the West Bengal government. Interviewing some of the survivors nearly three decades after Marichjhapi, Annu Jalais writes:

> Many islanders explained to me that they and tigers had lived in a sort of idyllic relationship prior to the events of Morichjhanpi [sic]. After Morichjhanpi [sic], they said, tigers had started preying on humans. This sudden development of their man-eating trait was believed to have been caused by two factors. One was the defiling of the Sunderban forest due to government violence, the second was

> because of the stress which had been put thereafter on the superiority of tigers in relation to the inhabitants of the Sunderbans.
>
> (2005, p. 1758)

This folk memory of the traumatic incident offers up a counter-narrative to the official 'green speak' in so far as it codes the government's actions as a *simultaneous* violation of the human and non-human and their relationships that form the specific environmental matrix of the *Sundarbans*. From the point of view of the refugees, violence had been committed against the forest, the humans and the animals at the same time, and this explained the subsequent fallen world where the animals now competed against the humans and the forest itself had grown a hostile, darker place. An elderly woman interviewed by Jalais thought that the significant rise in the number of tiger attacks on humans throughout the 1980s and 1990s must be attributed to the fact that the tigers had internalized the government's violent logic and were no longer interested in sharing the forest with the humans (p. 1761). This narrative, rehabilitated from the ashes of Marichjhapi by its victims, is a perfect imaginative and even mythic expression of the historical and empirical reality of the *Sundarbans* today, where decades of 'conservation' and 'development' work have produced a drastically impoverished environment where humans and non-humans must engage in deadly competition in order to survive.

Tracing shadow lines

It is not too difficult to enumerate the roots of the Marichjhapi tragedy. First, there is the pernicious logic of borders – drawn up initially, in this case, as a part of the compromise between Indian elites and the British imperial government in 1947. These borders of the new postcolonial nation-states enhanced the communalization of communities, killed millions and made refugees or alien residents of millions more people who were now suddenly designated to bear the burden of the mutually exclusive national territories of Pakistan, India, and after 1971, Bangladesh. Second, there is the allied logic of what Murray Bookchin and Andrew Ross among others would call a 'sham environmentalism'. The West Bengal government's criminalization of the refugees depended on the projection of a scenario in which they were seen as competing for scarce resources *against* other 'natural' agents like animals and the mangrove forest. This presumed a fundamental difference between human and non-human communities and plotted them in

what Andrew Ross has variously called 'austerity', 'supervoluntarism' or 'scarcity' paradigms in which they are forever doomed to engage in deadly competition to secure ever dwindling resources (Ross 1994, pp. 12–14). What is entirely absent from this picture are the complex but palpable continuities between human and non-human communities, the existence and possibilities of 'bio-regional' practices, and crucially, any analyses or even admission of the conditions that enforced the destructive cycle of competition in the first place (all elements, incidentally, found in the folk memories of the Marichjhapi survivors as shown above). Finally, there is the issue of misrepresentation and mistranslation that takes place when multicultural and multilinguistic communities are violently reshaped to accord with the new pattern of the postcolonial elitist agenda. Language was one of the grounds on which the 1971 war of independence was fought in Bangladesh, where the Urdu-speaking Pakistani elites refused demands for linguistic and political autonomy by the Bengali-speaking Bangladeshis. Language was again the rallying cry of the West Bengal communists when they accused the Indian nationalists of abandoning fellow Bengali-speaking refugees to their fate in the alien territories of central India. In both cases, however, the assumptions of the elites – that they and they alone had the power to understand, translate and transmit the text of their subaltern subjects – led to conflict and massacre of the same subjects that they purported to champion. Clearly, the assumption that there are neat borders between languages and that only elite specialists possess the skills to detect and cross these can be as lethal as any other kinds of assumptions about boundaries.

If these issues of territorial borders and their crossings, language and cultural (mis-)translations and the web of relations between humans and non-humans that we call the environment were at the heart of the Marichjhapi tragedy, it is not too difficult to see why a writer like Amitav Ghosh would be interested in the story. The issues of refugee movements, migration, the disruptive and constitutive flows of global colonial and neocolonial capital, the etchings left by these on communities and lands, the dynamics of resistances and appropriations – in other words, nothing less than the cultural and historical environments of colonialism and postcolonialism – have long been at the heart of Ghosh's work.[1] Kavita Daiya has applauded Ghosh's attempts to examine the sites and subjectivities of the 'migrant woman' through which one may continue 'cultivating importantly non-optimistic relations to global capitalistic forms, to national identities, to liberal promises of universal suffrage' (2003, pp. 36–7). In her essay on Ghosh's early

novels, Daiya finds three core messages in Ghosh's art: 'Community, like memory, is transnational … The liminality of inter-national migrants can also be testimonies to the material abjection and psychic violence of globalization that is elided in celebratory discourses … The transitional and translational space occupied by migrants is transnational too: not globalized' (ibid.) Furthermore, if one were to trace an arc from the novel *Shadowlines* (Ghosh 1988), to the essays collected in *The Imam and the Indian* (2002), to his recent articles on the phenomenon of 'eco-tourism' in the *Sundarbans* and the Asian tsunami crisis, it is clear that Ghosh does not believe that any meaningful consideration of salient contemporary issues can take place outside an explicitly environmental paradigm.[2]

In *The Hungry Tide* (2004) Ghosh brings all his concerns about language, borders, nations and movements to the story of Kanai and Piya and their meeting in a remote corner of the *Sundarbans*. Kanai, a successful entrepreneur from Delhi, has come back to claim some papers that his deceased uncle has left for him, and Piya, an American scientist of Indian extraction, is on a research trip to study the nearly extinct Gangetic river dolphins. But the papers that Kania claims tell him the story of the massacre of the Marichjhapi refugees and Piya's field trip brings her face to face with the reality of material life in the *Sundarbans*, where historical forces set humans and animals against each other in a grim fight to the finish. Piya and Kanai experience history as the cyclonic storm that batters them and the *Sundarbans* at the close of the novel. Moreover, in choosing to write about this particular constellation, the elements that add up to a specific environment of the postcolonial condition in this corner of the Indian subcontinent, Ghosh, like Roy before him, takes on an additional set of problems – ones concerned with the issue of the mimetic or representational – as an important focus of his creative task. How can one write about the massacred refugees without evoking the myths about original, organic and continuous connections with the forest and the tigers that is, after all, the stuff of many a 'deep' ecological dream? Can the refugee speak in the circuits of 'world literature' where the postcolonial English-language novel has accrued a considerable cultural prestige and economic clout? How to find the appropriate form and style to tell the story of a contemporary political crisis *as* an environmental crisis? This is to say that *The Hungry Tide* presents us both with a particular representation of postcolonial environment and a meditation on the representative techniques appropriate for this task.

'Out of place everywhere'

Migration and the idea of the 'foreign' appear in *The Hungry Tide* as important strategies which interrogate naive and potentially counter-productive nostalgia about roots. The novel begins with Kanai, a successful businessman who runs a translation agency for foreign workers in Delhi, waiting in a Calcutta suburban station for a train to take him back to the *Sundarbans*, where he grew up and where his aunt, Nilima, still lives and works. Kanai is watching Piya, whose androgynous physicality immediately marks her out as an exotic figure. This is confirmed moments later when he overhears her hesitant and broken Bengali. But Kanai himself is the 'one other' outsider on the platform, and physical markers – his flight bag, clothes and sunglasses, the confidence expressed in his stance – distinguish him from the locals just as effectively as Piya is set apart by her language and rucksack (2004, p. 6). Kanai – and Piya, the north American marine biologist – embody a metropolitan and cosmopolitan separation from suburban Calcutta and, later, from the *Sundarbans*. But the two protagonists are not the only aliens in the novel. Virtually every significant character operates under the sign of migration and displacement. Kanai is visiting his recently bereaved aunt, Nilima, to claim some papers left for him by his deceased uncle, Nirmal. Nilima and Nirmal appear to belong to the *Sundarbans* by the virtue of having devoted a large part of their lives to working there – she as the organizer of a women's cooperative that develops into a large medical centre and he as a teacher in a village school – but this is only part of their story. Nirmal is a refugee from Dhaka who arrived in Calcutta during the partition of 1947 and Nilima was born into a wealthy Calcutta family. They were forced to leave Calcutta when Nirmal's involvement with Marxist politics made him a subject of police surveillance in the early 1950s. Both witnessed the events that unfolded in Marichjhapi in 1979. It is for his uncle's diary that Kanai is coming back to the *Sundarbans*.

Piya is travelling to the *Sundarbans* to track the migratory patterns and habits of the Gangetic river dolphins. Her investigation brings her to Fokir, the fisherman who appears to be the local resident *par excellence*, a man whose intuitive understanding of the flows of the local river and ecosphere never ceases to amaze the widely-travelled Piya. Yet, Fokir too is an 'alien' – son of Kusum, who herself came to the *Sundarbans* as a Bangladeshi refugee, was sold into a Calcutta brothel, and later returned, fatefully, to settle on the island of Marichjhapi,

where she was killed either by the police or by their hired thugs. Fokir himself spends as much time as he can on the rivers, fishing with his son Tutul, away from human settlements. His wife Moyna says he feels 'out of place everywhere'. Mobility, migrancy and uprootedness permeate the world of the novel. As Nirmal's diary notes reiterate, this human mobility is an appropriate echo of the ever-shifting geography of the *Sundarbans* themselves: 'The river's channels are spread across the land like a fine-mesh net, creating a terrain where the boundaries between land and water are always mutating, always unpredictable … There are no borders here to divide fresh water from salt, river from sea' (p. 7). So, in a novel that has the memory of Marichjhapi at its heart, all the characters are, to varying degrees, migrants or refugees. A significant charge made by the West Bengal government's venomous propaganda (and indeed it is one made by propaganda against refugees everywhere) was and is that they did not belong to the land they occupied. By showing how even the most rooted of people are in fact formed by mobility, Ghosh unsettles normative understandings of belonging and displacement.

At the same time, Ghosh's conceptualization of mobility is a very far cry indeed from the celebratory trumpeting of movement without borders that one encounters in most contemporary accounts of globalization. The novel may be populated by them, but the migrants are clearly not all alike. Piya and Kanai begin as the archetypal 'new' elites – their cultural capital and status secured by access to the global archipelagos of wealth. By the end, their decision to come back to the *Sundarbans* shows the potential for a new form of belonging – the final chapter's title 'Home: an Epilogue' signalling this transformation. But this distance from the global to the local can only be travelled under the tutelage of the other migrants and refugees, whose varying distance and exclusion from the circuits of cosmopolitanism and metropolitanism ensure that they can understand and practise ways of being that dispute the valorization of elite mobility. If Piya and Kanai are the new elites of the novel, Nilima and Nirmal are their older national(ist) counterparts, while Fokir, Kusum and Moyna form the lowest tiers of the novel's social map. All are migrants, yet they are differentiated along the axes of class and capital. The new and the old elites must absorb lessons of belonging from their encounters with the subalterns. And what of these wretched figures themselves? Is their existence entirely tied to this function of teaching the elites to 'belong'? It is here, I think, that Ghosh's deliberately problematic and provocative meditation on language, translation and representation – some of which we shall discuss

below – becomes important. Much of what Kusum, Fokir and Horen say may be incomprehensible to the elites, much of it is mistranslated, misunderstood. But they are never dismissed, and it is in the novel's refusal to force transparency onto them, in its deferring to silences and gaps, that differences between the various migrants, between the powerful and the powerless, are acknowledged as a relational rather than an apartheid force. This differentiation of the conditions of migration is a mark of Ghosh's maturity both as a novelist and as a critic of globalization.

What do the elites learn in the *Sundarbans*? It is this: that their imagined liberal universalism is in fact hobbled by the logic of boundaries that (colonial) modernity has bequeathed them. It is perhaps also this: that in order to truly universalize universalism they need to first cross these boundaries by re-imagining themselves as they appear in the eyes of their oppressed subjects. Some of these elites are aware of their bounded condition. They berate those who imagine their solidarity with the powerless *without* giving up their elite privileges. Nilima points out the cruel gap between Nirmal and the Marichjhapi refugees:

> Their aims were quite straightforward. They just wanted a little land to settle on. But for that they were willing to pit themselves against the government. They were prepared to resist until the end. That was enough. This was the closest Nirmal would ever come to a revolutionary moment. He desperately wanted to be a part of it. Perhaps it was his way of delaying the recognition of his age.
>
> (pp. 119–20)

But Nilima too is unable to cross certain shadow lines. She accepts that she will have to refuse any aid to the refugees if she is to stay on the right side of the government and ensure continuous support for her organization.

> I simply cannot allow the Trust to get involved in this. There's too much at stake for us. You're not involved in the day-to-day business of running the hospital, so you have no idea of how hard we've had to work to stay on the right side of the government. If the politicians turn against us, we're finished.
>
> (p. 214)

This is the pragmatism of the liberal elites who cannot envisage any final devolution of power. Kanai scolds Piya for her idealizing of Fokir as a fellow 'deep' environmentalist: 'You shouldn't deceive yourself,

Piya: there wasn't anything in common between you then and there isn't now. Nothing. He's a fisherman and you're a scientist. What you see as fauna he sees as food … You're from different worlds, different planets' (p. 268).

This gap is dramatically illustrated when Fokir enthusiastically participates in the trapping and burning alive of a tiger, to the nauseated outrage of Piya. She has to accept that 'nature' means very different things to her and Fokir, and this difference is constituted through the vastly different kinds of capital and labour they command. But the difference is also generated by the specifics of the colonial and postcolonial histories that divide them. As we have seen, the present-day survivors of Marichjhapi maintain that it was the government's violence that turned tigers and humans into competitors instead of neighbours, and that the 'green speak' of the Calcutta *bhadralok* was merely a way of re-packaging nature in order to maintain their own elitist grip on West Bengal. One of them asked recently: 'Why have our dead remained unaccounted for and un-mourned by the babus of Kolkata, forced to hover as spirits in the forest, while a tiger who enters our village and then gets killed puts us all behind bars?' (Jalais 2005, pp. 1760–1).

Given this history of rampant injustice, the forced competition between the humans and tigers in the *Sundarbans* assumes deadly form and the classic outlines of subaltern resentment. Tigers and poor islanders are reduced to killing each other in order to survive. Piya, the privileged cosmopolitan is locked out of this history and cannot understand the savage anger displayed by the villagers at the trapped tiger. But the killing of the tiger, and Ghosh's recreation of the emotions and structures of feelings exhibited by the villagers is a precise representation of the lethal relationships that exist in *Sundarbans* today amongst the victims of Bengali elite politics:

> 'This is an animal, Kanai,' Piya said, 'You can't take revenge on an animal.'
>
> All around them now people were howling, their faces lit by the dancing flames: *Maar*! *Maar*! … Now, at close quarters, she saw in the dancing light of the flame, that the man's spear-point was stained with blood and that there were bits of black-and-gold fur stuck between the splinters. Suddenly it was as if she could see the animal cowering inside the pen, recoiling from the bamboo spears, licking the wounds that had been gouged into its flesh …
>
> 'How can I not be upset? That's the most horrifying thing I've ever seen – a tiger set on fire.'

> 'He says, when a tiger comes into a human settlement, it's because it wants to die.'
>
> (2004, pp. 294–5)

Piya's conservationist outrage here shows that she fundamentally misunderstands the relationship between the villagers and the tiger. Fokir's explanation, translated by Kanai, is also the beginning of her encounter with, and realization of, an alternative history of and perspective on the postcolonial environment.

In order to try and comprehend this other perspective, the elites must first unlearn paradigmatic notions of history, environment and culture. What is common to Piya's conservationist ethos and Nirmal's Marxism is that they remain wedded to idealistic and undifferentiated, not to say Euro-centric, notions of progress. Nirmal's resources of hope, the historical precedence that he uses to support the rights of the Marichjhapi refugees, is drawn from the example set by a 'benevolent' imperialist. Some of the *Sundarban* islands were first settled during the nineteenth century at the behest of a Scottish businessman, Daniel Hamilton. Hamilton had made his fortune in a shipping business run out of Calcutta, and invested it in the fertile islands, settling them with regional migrants, who had historically been displaced by the circulation of colonial capital. For Nirmal, by this act Hamilton the 'monopolikapitalist' was transformed into Hamilton the utopian socialist. It is in this spirit that he wants to support and succour the settlers of Marichjhapi. Nirmal misreads liberal imperialism as socialist progress. He avoids any systemic analysis of Hamilton's actions or his legacy in the historical and material constitution of power. Thus, progress for Nirmal is tied to the notion of charitable, elite benevolence. Hence, over Marichjhapi, he fails to comprehend the betrayal by a nominally Marxist government (which had in postcolonial Bengal succeeded to the Hamiltons of this world and their monopoly on the rhetoric of progress) of refugees whose efforts in Marichjhapi embodied the majesty and hope of dignified labour: 'Such industry! Such diligence! Yet it was only a few weeks since they had come … I felt the onrush of a strange, heady excitement: suddenly it dawned on me that I was watching the birth of something new, something hitherto unseen' (p. 171).

The various other factors that form the grid of this particular set of power relations – the high-caste/class composition of the government of West Bengal, the international politics of the formation of the refugee crisis in Bengal, the conflict between the local landed and landless rural 'vote-banks' of the Left Front government – cannot be admitted in

Nirmal's analysis. He is baffled by the failure of organized labour to win the backing of the government. He is haunted by his own inability to close the gap between him and the very refugees whose cause he seeks to embrace:

> 'Then do you know anyone with power? Policemen? Forest Rangers? Politicians?' 'No', I said. 'No one.'
>
> 'Then what can you do for us?' He said, growing peevish. 'Of what use could you be?'
>
> (p. 173)

Since Nirmal fails to analyse the historical and material differences between those who wield power in both the colonial and postcolonial dispensations and those at the receiving end of this power, he is unable to shake off his own idealist notions of progress and solidarity.

Piya's 'deep ecological' conservationism has similar blind spots. Like Nirmal's Daniel Hamilton, a host of benevolent imperialist knowledge-gatherers – William Roxburgh, Edward Blyth, even the great J.E. Gray ('of *Gray's Anatomy*') – are Piya's intellectual and ideological role models. To her, these eighteenth and nineteenth-century British naturalists, geographers and scientists are very much a part of the heroic narrative of the European Enlightenment – selflessly working in hostile environments for the extension of the frontiers of knowledge. But the particularities of colonial and imperial knowledge-gathering are left out of this narrative: how is the classification of species also a part of the world-view of imperialism? What lines of power connect naturalists such as Edward Blyth, the dolphins he studies, and the crowd of Indian onlookers and helpers? How do the museums and botanical gardens (we recall *Kim*'s *jadoogarh* here) created by these botanists also create an information map for empire? Piya herself, kitted out with the latest GPS monitor, range finder, depth sounder and binoculars, is the embodiment of the panoptic knowledge that was generated by, and in turn sustained, capitalist colonialism. As a result, she is unable to see 'nature' as being continuous with specific historical, political and cultural dimensions or environment as the sum of these constituent parts. She cannot fathom how a 'man of nature' like Fokir can participate in the capturing and killing of a tiger. Her sensibilities at this point are identical to those of the Scandanavian children who every year donate large amounts of money to save the Bengal tiger without realizing how many Indian villagers have lost their homes and livelihood as a result of their intervention (Mallick 1999, p. 116). Looking at Fokir, Piya

can only see unbridgeable difference: 'I know this is what he grew up with. It's just, I thought somehow he'd be different' (Ghosh 2004, p. 297).

'Our translated world'

And yet the aim of Ghosh's novel is decidedly *not* to validate a reflexive rejection of *all* universalism in favour of the idea of irreducible difference between various kinds of humans and between humans and non-humans – a rejection, incidentally, that in addition to environmental catastrophe, has sown the cancer of sectarian violence and helped religious fundamentalism spread throughout the postcolonial states of the world. If the novel exposes the cultural and linguistic mistranslation and misreading that enact the material and political distance between the ruling elites and their subjects, it also holds out the possibility of reaching across that distance and imagining a form of belonging that brings the rulers and their human and non-human subjects together in a sustaining relationship. In this Ghosh resembles all the other novelists in our discussion. Arundhati Roy, Ruchir Joshi and Indra Sinha, in their very different ways, are also concerned with imagining commonalities and ways of belonging in the ravaged postcolonial environments at the same time as they acknowledge the considerable forces invested against these redemptive possibilities. And we shall see repeatedly how their imaginative attempts are coded into both the content and the form of their novels.

In *The Hungry Tide*, for example, Ghosh tells the tale of belonging through a meditation on the issues of language, representation and mimetic techniques that can be read as a meta-textual commentary on the form of his postcolonial novel itself. Ghosh's technique is perhaps less explicit than Arundhati Roy's, which we discussed in the previous chapter, but both writers are concerned with the same problem: how can the story of the postcolonial ruling elite's complicity in the devastation of their subjects and their environment be told in an elitist language and cultural form, the postcolonial English novel? And both writers appear to have come up with the same answer: to transform the novel itself by incorporating into it elements of the local, vernacular cultural forms, thereby rendering it 'improper' according to normative and prescriptive understandings of what a novel should be. These formal and stylistic improprieties mark the postcolonial novel's attempts to represent and embody its own distinctive historical environment. As we saw, Roy engaged elements of folk dance-drama, *Kathakali*, in her novel

in order to tell the story of the disaster wrought on the fabric of a small town in Kerala. Ghosh, in order to tell a similar story about provincial Bengal, mobilizes a host of local cultural forms – among them, the Bengali folk-theatre form known as *Jatra*.

All the elites in the novel – Nirmal, Kania and Piya – encounter a series of heterogeneous cultural texts – songs, folk tales, oral histories and, most crucially, *Jatra*, which provide them with challenging counter-narratives that disturb their normative understandings of knowledge, civility and progress. Nirmal, for example, records one such example of cross-reading in his diary (which is in turn read and digested by Kanai). Travelling on a boat, Nirmal reads from his copy of one of the iconic European written histories of early modern Bengal – François Bernier's *Travels* – to Horen, the boatman. As he reads the account of Bernier's adventures, caught up in a storm three hundred years ago on the very same river upon which they are travelling, Nirmal assumes he is enlightening the illiterate Horen about the ebbs and flows of history as they are charted by canonical knowledge contained in a European text. To his irritation, however, Horen keeps interrupting the narrative with his own 'text', his intimate knowledge of the territory that Bernier writes about – an understanding that is acutely chronotopical in a way Nirmal's is not:

> 'Oh!', cried Horen. 'I know where this happened: they must have been at Gerafitola.'
>
> 'Rubbish, Horen,' I said. 'How could you know such a thing? This happened over three hundred years ago.'
>
> 'But I've seen it too,' Horen protested, 'and it's exactly as you describe … I know that place … My chhotokaka spent the night there once, and all night long he heard strange voices uttering strange words: it must have been those same ghosts they saw.'
>
> (p. 146)

Nirmal gradually intuits that Horen's knowledge is of a different order and form than his, and that he can learn more from people like Horen and Kusum than from liberal imperialists like Hamilton. This is confirmed in another such encounter with Horen, when the boatman chants a poem as he worships the local deity – *Bonbibi*. Stunned that a Hindu boatman is using Islamic invocations and a mixture of Arabic, Persian and Bengali to worship a nominally Hindu goddess like *Bonbibi,* Nirmal is further astonished to see that the prayer is taken from a

nineteenth-century pamphlet by a Muslim writer, Abdur Rahaman. He understands that:

> the mudbanks of the tide country are shaped not only by rivers of silt, but also by rivers of language: Bengali, English, Arabic, Hindi, Arakanese and who knows what else? Flowing into each other they create a proliferation of small worlds that hang suspended in the flow … a meeting not just of many rivers, but a circular roundabout people can use to pass in many directions – from country to country and even between faiths and religions.
>
> (p. 247)

Nirmal's achievement is that he uses these cross-readings in order to imagine himself through the eyes of others – human and non-human. As a result, his notion of history is expanded and 'naturalized'. If he had started from a position of celebrating the benevolent colonization of the tide country by the capital of Daniel Hamilton, he ends by reciting the story of imperial hubris – the story of the destruction of Port Canning. A would-be model nineteenth-century port named after the then viceroy, Port Canning was an instance of a complete failure of the imperial government to understand or integrate with the local environmental systems, in this case the cyclones of Gangetic Bengal. It was destroyed in the great storm and floods of 1867 and the port project abandoned shortly thereafter, although a small town continued to cling to a provincial existence at the original site. After his re-educative encounters with Horen's local, oral knowledge forms, Nirmal identifies most with Henry Piddington, an amateur meteorologist who repeatedly warned the British planners about the folly of building Port Canning on the unprotected banks of the Matla river. Nearly a century and a half after the Port Canning fiasco, Marichjhapi too was an incident that measured the environmental disturbances created by the hubris of the (now postcolonial) state. And like Piddington at Port Canning, Nirmal's efforts to stop the calamity at Marichjhapi lead to his losing his reputation and mind. But it is his records of his encounters with Horen's wealth of oral narratives, chants and pamphlets that decisively alter his world-view and which now offer the present generation in the novel a shot at redemption.

It is Kanai who most explicitly assumes the burden of Nirmal's experience. While reading his uncle's diary, Kanai remembers an episode from his own childhood when he accompanied Kusum to a *Jatra* performance

of the same *Bonbibi* story that Nirmal heard in Horen's chants and songs. Several aspects of the *Jatra* performance struck young Kanai and remained lodged in his memory – the huge communal gathering, the open stage and the anti-realist melodrama of the actors. But perhaps the aspect of the theatre that had the most impact on Kanai was just how international and borderless this allegedly 'provincial', 'local' art form was: 'the story of the tiger-goddess did not begin either in the heavens or on the banks of the Ganges, like the mythological tales with which he was familiar. Instead, the opening scene was set in a city in Arabia … Medina, one of the holiest places of Islam' (pp. 102–3). This discovery turns Kanai's (and most of the novel's readers') preconceived ideas about the 'local' and the 'provincial' on their heads. Like Nirmal, these memories of a multicultural, polyglot *Jatra* lead Kanai to accept that the culture of the *Sundarbans,* like its geography, is composed of diverse worldly currents that dispute contemporary Euro-centric notions of modernity and globalization. He also realizes just how effective the *Jatra*'s apparently crude, anti-realistic mimetic techniques were:

> The terror he had felt when the demon charged Dukhey was real and immediate, even though there was nothing convincing about the tiger and it could be plainly seen that the animal was only a man, dressed in a painted sheet and a mask … everyone in the audience wept, although the actress's arrival was anything but instantaneous. On the contrary, the audience had actually had to hurry her along a little, because even as Dukhey lay unconscious with the tiger poised to devour him, she had stopped to lean over the side of the stage in order to clean her mouth of a great wad of *paan*.
>
> (p. 105)

The emotional charge delivered through this folk technique binds the audience and the performers into a community. Colonial and postcolonial modernity, with capitalist development and progress at their hearts, are concerned precisely with dissolving the emotional community and community of emotions. Like Kanai, Ghosh wants us as readers of the distinctive cultural form of this modernity, the novel, to rediscover this collectivity. But unlike Kanai (or even Nirmal), we are not first-hand witnesses of a *Jatra* (or the oral folk-tales of the *Sundarbans*). How can we even begin to appreciate the transformations experienced by these characters?

Before we examine the way in which Ghosh approaches this question, we should attempt to acquaint ourselves with some specificities

of the *Jatra* form. This powerful folk theatrical form has displayed, in common with other folk art forms in south Asia, an uncanny knack of surviving in the face of the overwhelming pressure exerted on it by the more modern and dominant global cultural forms such as cinema. Its roots probably lie in the fifteenth-century religious *Bhakti* movement in Bengal, which put great emphasis on collective singing and musical performances which allegedly sent devotees into a trance (Gargi 1991, p. 14; Banerjee 1999, p. 4). *Bhakti* cultists roamed all over the countryside, taking their performances to the rural fairs, and in time various humorous and satirical narrative elements accrued until these morphed into night-long communal occasions that came to be known as *Jatra* (which, in Bangla also means 'travel' or 'journey' – an appropriate homage to its mobile performance structure, which of course also makes it a peculiarly appropriate presence in a novel about historical, environmental and cultural mobility and connections).

Jatra has survived by incorporating many of the elements of more contemporary forms of cinema and music technology, such as the use of microphones, re-mixed recorded music and spotlights with colour filters, thereby often incurring the wrath of conservative commentators who have bemoaned the loss of its 'purity' and its descent into unholy hybridity (Sengupta 1999, p. 100). These accusations, like all nostalgia for cultural purity, fundamentally misread the ordinary impurities that always already constitute all cultural forms. The *Jatra* of the sixteenth, seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, for example, were made up of *panchali* (actor's monologues), *jhumur* (duet songs with dances), *keertan* (devotional singing) and *kabigan* (poetry recitation) (Gargi 1991, p. 15). This innovative juxtaposing of distinctive cultural elements would remain a key feature of *Jatra* performances over the next two centuries.

Scholars have always been struck by how much more experimental *Jatra* has been with mimetic techniques when compared to the realist norms that have tended to dominate the cultural field since the nineteenth century. The use of stage areas, movement, speed and the stylized stance of the actors all contribute to anti-realist qualities that are sometimes pronounced to be *avant-gardist* (Gargi 1991, p. 6). The peculiar continuity practices of the form, for example, gave rise to a very specific presentation of stage time: 'Sometimes, while the actor is on the gangway, visually and psychologically present, his exit is overlapped by the entry of another actor who immediately becomes engaged in action on stage … The actors do not have to disappear completely in the wings as in Western representational theatre' (pp. 12–13). That is to say, in *Jatra,* the simultaneous visual presence of actors at

varying and various stages of the narrative permit an anachronistic representation of time, which cannot progress in a linear fashion. An actor finishes her part, but remains visible on the stage, simultaneously absent (in terms of narrative) and present (in terms of optics). This non-linear representation of time (moments, as actualized by the presence of the actors, do not vanish, but remain present) is best seen in the stock character, *Vivek*, or 'conscience' who is not bound by the normal laws of time and space. He can appear at any time, in any space – in heaven, hell, a bedroom, a forest or a street – 'He lives in the past, present, and future' (p. 29). In short, *Jatra*, like many folk forms, represents a cyclical and not a linear representation of time, and makes visible the simultaneity of past, present and future. Tonally, too, *Jatra* holds realist conventions at bay. The strong persistence of the various musical genres it incorporates results in an eclectic mixture of prose and verse, of song and speech: 'While rendering a highly ornamental piece of prose in high-pitched timbre, a character would suddenly break out into a song – to express the profundity or keenness of the situation' (Chakraborty 1999, p. 93). The anachronistic representation of time finds its reflection in an uneven textual style that lends itself to the generic flavour of melodrama.

This anti-realist, musical, melodramatic and stylistically uneven folk theatre, with its mobile staging and performance itinerary, provides the perfect vehicle for expressing popular political perceptions and sentiments. During the colonial era, for example, the form became very closely associated with anti-colonial protests. Minoti Chatterjee has shown how, in the aftermath of the colonial government's decision to divide the province of Bengal in the early twentieth century (a plan that aimed to communalize Bengal and which succeeded eventually, with the help of the Bengali elites, in 1947), figures such as the poet and writer Mukundadas used *Jatra* performances to spread the message of resistance throughout the Bengali countryside (1999, p. 45). After independence, the cultural wings of communist and socialist organizations consciously used *Jatra*'s stylistic elements in street theatre performances in both rural and urban areas in order to expand their influence across the country (Dharwadkar 2005, pp. 11–16). In short, in colonial and postcolonial eras (as well as in pre-colonial times when the *Bhakti* movement within which *Jatra* had its roots itself took the form of radical protest against the dominant social and religious order of the day), the stylistic and situational elements of the *Jatra* have often lent themselves to criticism of the ruling social, political, cultural and economic norms.

In sum then, *Jatra* as a folk theatrical form is marked by its incorporation of a host of cultural forms and styles; this has given it its distinctive anti-realist, melodramatic and formally uneven flavour, marked, for instance, by the juxtaposition of song and prose; it avoids linear, teleological representation of time, favouring instead cyclical, anachronistic patterns; these stylistic features often correspond to a popular, radical critique of norms; finally, its situational mobility makes it a distinctively communal art form.

Cyclonic forms

Why does Ghosh insert the *Jatra* episode into an English-language novel that is, sociologically speaking, a participant in the global anglophone cultural circuit and that formally, in so far as it is tailored for a privatized consumption pattern, appears to validate the very opposite of a collective aesthetic experience? Can it ever be anything more than an exoticizing gesture, aimed at providing the frisson of the pleasure of tasting unfamiliar peripheral cultural forms to the novel's cosmopolitan readers? I would suggest that the answer is yes. Like Arundhati Roy, Ghosh's use of a local cultural practice assumes simultaneously thematic and formal importance that signals the historical compulsion of the postcolonial novel to at once stretch and demonstrate the limits of its own forms.

Thematically, as Kanai's memories of watching the *Bonbibi* performance and Nirmal's interruptions by the boatman Horen's chants and tales show, *Jatra* songs and narratives are used in the novel to show the existence of a popular folk epistemology and aesthetics that disputes dominant ideas of knowledge, history and writing. What strikes Kanai as he recalls the *Jatra* performance is first of all how it ranged across historical space and time to reveal the cosmopolitanism of what he had taken to be a provincial backwater – Arabia and Java are shown to be embedded in the very make-up of the *Sundarbans*; second, he sees that the mimetic charge of the performance is derived from its collective and communal staging, thereby revealing the extent to which people whom he had dismissed as the illiterate 'bottom-third' actually possessed considerable creative and intellectual power; finally, the mythic expression of the symbiotic relationship between humans and non-humans (in this case tigers) told by the *Jatra* repels the dominant educated understanding of nature and environment that the young Kanai grew up with and that the historical postcolonial administration of India and Bengal continue to profess.

In addition, *Jatra* has a decisive formal influence on Ghosh's novel and I would suggest that this is seen best in its use of three distinctive elements – melodrama, temporality and the use of songs and music. Ghosh uses these elements to foreground the issues of translation, difference and autonomy with which the elites both inside and outside his novel (in the shape of his readers) must engage in order to unlearn the dominant norms of capitalism and colonialism. Consider a key scene in this moral re-education of the elites, where Fokir rows Kanai to a small island, the site of a *Bonbibi* shrine. For Fokir, the island holds no fear for those who are pure at heart, but the impure are sure to be punished by the servant of the forest deity – the tiger. Kanai, on the other hand, completely loses his self-control – tendrils and mud holds him to the ground, his anger 'came welling up in an atavistic explosiveness', and his vision is blurred by the prospect of death from the blow from a tiger's paw: 'You felt no pain when it happened; you were dead already of the shock induced by the tiger's roar.' In his terror he sees the waiting tiger, it is not clear whether this is a hallucination or not, before being rescued by the arrival of Piya (Ghosh 2004, p. 326). The language and events of the entire passage are pitched at a theatrical level of melodrama. What Kanai realizes during the encounter is this:

> In Kanai's professional life there had been a few instances in which the act of interpretation had given him the momentary sensation of being transported out of his own body and into another … But he was not working now and yet it was exactly this feeling that came upon him as he looked at Fokir: It was as though his own vision were being refracted through those opaque, unreadable eyes, and he was seeing not himself, Kanai, but a great host of people – a double for the outside world, someone standing in for the men who had destroyed Fokir's village, burnt his home and killed his mother; he had become a token for a vision of human beings in which a man such as Fokir counted for nothing, a man whose value was less than that of an animal … Fokir had brought him here not because he wanted him to die, but because he wanted him to be judged.
>
> (pp. 326–7)

Learning to see oneself with other eyes, eyes that belong to the lost and the broken, is made possible in the novel only when melodrama is staged by borrowing folk-theatre idioms of heightened emotive language, mythic morality and judgement, the forest goddess and the tiger.

For the novel's cosmopolitan reader, the same lesson is learnt through the faint unease evident in the shifting of the privileged normative cosmopolitan or metropolitan point of view in the novel to that of the local or provincial, mirrored in the formal mixture of psychological realism (as in the passage above) and the highly melodramatic and theatrical.

The melodramatic pitch of the novel is often sustained, just as in *Jatra* performances, by the adjacency of prose, songs and recitations. The islanders, even as they speak, frequently break into song to emphasize the importance of the moment. Often, the reader's experience of this is mirrored in the novel in the incomprehension of the cosmopolitan character of Piya. When Fokir breaks out into a song as she floats with him on his boat at night, Piya is surprised: 'for it bore no resemblance to any Indian music she had ever heard before – not the Hindi film music her father liked nor the Bengali songs her mother had sometimes sung. His voice sounded almost hoarse and it seemed to crack and sob as it roamed the notes' (pp. 98–9).

Even when someone like Nirmal can understand the song's language (and the reader, through him, can do the same), the contents surprise him: 'imagine my astonishment on hearing these Arabic invocations!' (p. 246). In a *Jatra* performance, these musical outbreaks emphasize the internal emotional pitch of the characters themselves. As we have already mentioned, in Ghosh's novel they are used to underscore an additional realization of the existence of a subaltern cultural and intellectual autonomy. This leads to a kind of humility and devolution of the presumed representational and epistemological power of the novel's elites. They recognize that other forms of knowledge and aesthetics, ones they habitually dismissed as stunted, actually hold powerful counter-perspectives to their own. This is most obviously dramatized in Kanai's gesture of deliberately refusing to translate Fokir's songs for Piya in their entirety:

> You asked me what Fokir was singing and I said *I couldn't translate it*: it was too difficult. And this was no more than the truth, for in those words there was a history that is not just his own but also of this place, the tide country … it lives in him and in some way, perhaps, it still plays a part in making him the person he is. This is my gift to you … *Such flaws as there in my rendition of it I do not regret, for perhaps they will prevent me from fading from sight as a good translator should: for once, I shall be glad if my imperfections render me visible.*
>
> (p. 354; emphasis added)

Kanai's putting his own text under erasure, his highlighting of its imperfections, his admission of the difficulties (if not the impossibility) of achieving the perfect translation, is more than a declaration of his love for Piya. It is a gesture of respect for the historical and cultural integrity of the local and the provincial that cannot be, and should not be converted into a globalized commodity. The songs, as they are sung, signal presence, resistance and an ethical limit. Just as in the case of Arundhati Roy's *Kathakali*, not everything in the folk world of Fokir and Horen *can* be colonized by the translational imperative of the elites, not everything *must* be known and converted into global commodities. Finally, time in the novel follows *Jatra*'s ever-recurring, cyclical pattern. Disparate chronological points – some from nineteenth-century Bengal, 1979, the 1950s, and the first decades of the twenty-first century that are the novel's present – are all strung together by a variety of discourses – some autobiographical, some historical, some pedagogical, others poetic and still others fictional. The history of the *Sundarbans*, like the climate, is literally cyclonic. Again and again the storms arrive, irregularly, over the centuries, to expose the drastic limitations of certain human world-views.

The 'archaic' folk elements of *Jatra,* then, are used by Ghosh at both thematic and formal levels. In his hands, the postcolonial English language novel becomes a process that searches for the appropriate representation of the historical-environmental specificities of the south Bengal borderlands. The story of the Marichjhapi massacre is told as one in a series of political and ecological catastrophes provoked or enacted by the ruling classes since the advent of colonialism. And these stories demand a stretching and tweaking of the novel form, mixing it with local cultural repositories of knowledge and memory, such as *Jatra*. The kind of ethical response such a novel demands from its global, cosmopolitan readers, is modelled for us by Ghosh in the transformation of Piya's character. And since the romance of Piya and Fokir is one of the central melodramatic devices in the novel and also carries much of its ethical charge, I shall close this chapter by briefly outlining the Damascene conversion of the cosmopolitan conservationist Piya.

As we have seen, one of the distinctive markers of Piya's cosmopolitanism is her scientific training. We are told that the roots of her desire to become a scientist lay in her determination to escape the unhappy memories of her parents and their Bengali language:

> The accumulated resentments of their life were always phrased in that language, so that for her, its sound had come to represent the music of unhappiness. As she lay curled in the cupboard, she would

> dream of washing her head of those sounds; she wanted words with the heft of stainless steel, sounds that had been boiled clean, like a surgeon's instruments, tools with nothing attached except meanings that could be looked up in a dictionary – empty of pain and memory and inwardness.
>
> (p. 94)

This desire for an antiseptic, classificatory, limited relationship with the world is the paradigm for her scientific work – her intense submersion into the process of observing, recording and analysing marine life as data – and for her fierce desire to preserve the subjects of this exercise. Her world is a scientific 'field' rather than a place of habitation and 'it was the exclusion of intimate involvements that made a place into a field and the line between the two was marked by a taboo she could not cross, except at the risk of betraying her vocation' (p. 112).

But if she is to transcend the limits of this cosmopolitanism it is precisely her vocation that she must betray. Piya's transcendence takes place not only through her encounters with the texts of Nirmal, Kanai and the sounds of *Bonbibi Johuaranama*, but also through an intimate, material and disorientating contact with the tide country, and specifically, with Fokir. Initially, the linguistic, cultural and material gaps between them render Fokir an inscrutable sign to Piya, a sign she feels she is at liberty as a cosmopolitan to interpret and to attach meanings to as she sees fit. Thus, she mistakenly idealizes him as the 'natural man'. It is only in the shock of seeing Fokir's exultation in the killing of the tiger, in the realization that she is being physically prevented by him from intervening in what to her is a defining act of barbarity, that she registers that his 'difference' was not of the kind she thought it was. Piya's achievement, like Kanai's, is the admission of this difference, her surrendering to this intimacy. Shortly afterwards, before they leave on their final fateful trip down the river, Piya and Fokir sit together on his boat, surrounded by silence and yet connected:

> They sat unmoving, like animals who had been paralysed by the intensity of their awareness of each other. When their eyes met again it was as if he knew at a glance what she was thinking … It was as if their shared glimpse of the lunar rainbow had somehow broken something that had existed between them, as if something had ended, leaving behind a pain of a kind that could not be understood because it never had a name.
>
> (pp. 352–3)

What has ended is the eroticization and exoticization of difference, and an acceptance of autonomy (they can never communicate through language, and Fokir's history can never be properly known by Piya) and through these, paradoxically, a sense of connection and belonging.

In the final section of the novel, Piya and Fokir find themselves caught in a cyclone. Nirmal's prediction of the river rising and an apocalyptic storm has come true yet again. The storm and flood wipe out many islands. Kanai, Nilima and Moyna survive in the storm shelter built in Nilima's NGO-run hospital. Most of Piya's gadgets are blown away, and she and Fokir tie themselves to a tree to escape a similar fate. Birds, tired of outrunning the storm, drop onto them. A tiger swims across the river and takes refuge on a tree next to them. The wind changes direction:

> Where she had the tree trunk to shelter her before, now there was only Fokir's body … Their bodies were so close, so finely merged that she could feel the impact of everything hitting him, she could feel the blows raining down on his back. She could feel the bones of his cheeks as if they had been superimposed upon her own; it was as if the storm had given them what life could not.
>
> (p. 390)

The storm brings destruction and Fokir's death, but its gift is the birth in Piya of a sense of place, the final abandoning of the 'field'. In the middle of death, she stumbles onto life.

It is tempting to see this ending as a redemption song for the elites and a (painful) celebration of their homecoming. The novel ends with Piya deciding to continue her work in the *Sundarbans* and moving in with Nilima. Kanai too, has decided to scale down his operations in Delhi and is coming to visit Piya and Nilma. Fokir's death is the price of this renewed sense of belonging. But Ghosh's novel is anything but celebratory. It constantly raises questions about its own representative limits by foregrounding powerful autonomous subaltern cultural and material practices. It centres on refugee migration, not some cosmopolitan boundary-crossing as *the* postcolonial event. It is only when we can learn to accept the refugee's claim to belong that we can also see ourselves as belonging to an environment and not standing on some imagined ground outside it.

We can here quickly remark on some of the broad patterns that are emerging from our readings of particular examples of a postcolonial Indian cultural form – the English-language novel. In both Roy and Ghosh's works we can isolate some key features – their novel's insistence

that telling the story of postcolonial India in a reflective and critical manner necessarily involves telling the story of its specific environment; that environment is always present as a field of complex and symbiotic continuities between the human and the non-human, the 'natural' and the 'cultural'; thus, environment is also seen as a register of the historical process of the uneven development and penetration of capital, often named as 'globalization'; that in order to narrate this story of the uneven historical environment of a postcolonial state, the novel must be able formally and stylistically to *embody* it as well; that this embodiment takes place as these novels absorb elements of some of the local or regional cultural forms that surround it; and finally, that this deliberate act of adoption of formal or stylistic unevenness, and the resultant complex of anti-mimesis is often signalled by large spaces given within the novels to these allied cultural forms, a space which enables the novel to perform a reflection of its own aesthetic limits and possibilities. Now we will see whether these patterns can also be detected in the works of two other novelists.

6
Dead Air: Indra Sinha

The Bhopal gas tragedy of 1984 has been called the world's worst industrial disaster. The release of a deadly cocktail of toxic gases, mainly composed of methyl isocyanite (MIC), from the pesticide factory owned by the giant multinational company Union Carbide, affected an estimated 200,000 people out of the 900,000 who lived in this rapidly-expanding central Indian city. Between 5000 and 10,000 people were killed almost immediately, with a further 60,000 sustaining injuries and a significant number succumbing to these over the next days, months and years. The horrific damage to animal and plant life remains largely uncharted.

The incident offers a grim summary of a number of the issues that we have been looking at. In that it involved the accidental release of massive amounts of toxic gas from a pesticide factory, it raises questions about the viability and ethics of the use of artificial poisons to increase the productivity of the basic food crops on which the billions of the people living in postcolonial societies depend. In that the gas was released from a factory built in a highly-populated urban area, it raises the question of the politics of environmental toxicity – who decides to build (or dump) what, where and how – which affects a disproportionate number of human and non-human beings who have little say in the matter. And, in that the pesticide factory was owned by a US multinational company, the tragedy raises questions about international frameworks of law, justice and rights, or more appropriately here, the lack thereof. The legal wrangle over accountability and compensation revealed that the idea of 'environment', and indeed, of the 'human', carried radically different meanings in the 'global north' of Euro-north America and the 'global south' of the postcolonial nations.

Given this, and despite the well-documented and often heroic struggle by the people of Bhopal and a host of activist organizations to achieve justice, it seems somewhat strange that Indian literature, whether written in English or not, seems by and large to have avoided taking on the full burden of reflection and representation of the events of that terrible December night in 1984. There has been some very popular street theatre, poetry and at least one play (all written and performed in Hindi and other non-English Indian languages), but it is the non-literary media – sculpture, photography and film documentaries – that have tended to respond best to the Bhopal tragedy and its aftermath. However, Indra Sinha's internationally recognized 2007 novel, *Animal's People*, takes on this tragic situation and provides us with an opportunity of continuing to investigate some aspects of the literatures and cultures of postcolonial environments. Did the short-listing of the novel for the prestigious Man Booker prize have anything to do with the fact that this was a work by a cosmopolitan author (who grew up and lives in England and France) writing in English? Or was there something specific about the literary quality of the novel itself? If so, is the literary quality of the novel achieved in dialogue with other cultural forms that surround it? Do novels about environmental disasters play well in an era saturated with debates about global warming and impending catastrophe? Does this hold even for those novels that seem to raise uncomfortable questions about the responsibility for such catastrophic events? Here, we will attend to such questions by looking at the specificity of Sinha's intervention. But first we must revisit the dark contours of the historical tragedy itself.

'Playing with poison'

At first, the air smells of burnt chillies. If you do not take the hint and get away as fast as possible, soon you find yourself in a thick white mist. Your eyes, throat and lungs begin to burn and fill up with oozing fluid and melting tissues. Blinded, you gasp for breath as fluid begins filling up your lungs. Then you lose control of your nervous system, you vomit uncontrollably, cramps seize your stomach. If you are lucky, you lose consciousness quickly and you die. If you are not, your death is a long drawn out, agonizing affair. If you survive, your lungs and eyes will never work properly again. Muscle pains and ulcers will prevent you from working or leading a normal life. You will give birth to unimaginably deformed or dead babies. This, on the night of 4 December 1984, and over the subsequent days and years, has been the experience

of around 200,000 citizens who lived within 40 square kilometres of the Union Carbide pesticide factory located in the central Indian city of Bhopal. Estimates vary as to how many died immediately, but the consensus is – as noted above – that it was between 5000 and 10,000 people and countless animals and plants. Over the next few months and years another 60,000 suffered disabilities and untimely deaths (Everest 1986, pp. 16–18). They had all inhaled a toxic concoction of methyl isocyanate gas (MIC) that had accidentally escaped from the factory.

In the light of the subsequent debates, it is interesting to notice the immediate tonal differences in the reporting of the event in India and the United States, the two countries brought together by the logic of Union Carbide's multinational capital. On the morning of 4 December, most Indian national newspapers were struggling to comprehend the scale of the disaster. The *Hindustan Times,* the *Hindu* and the *Statesman* all reported between 350 and 410 human deaths. There were already speculations about the responsibility for the leak. The *Hindustan Times,* in an article headed 'Gas Kills Over 400 in Bhopal' quoted a factory official who claimed that remedial measures had been taken and the release of the gas 'completely stopped' within minutes (*Hindustan Times* 1984). But then, it was also a factory official who told the *Free Press Journal* of Bhopal 'Nothing has happened. Can't you see us alive?' while standing next to several dead bodies (Everest 1986, p. 15). By the next morning, the *Hindustan Times* was running a number of stories, not only about the rising numbers of victims ('Poison Gas Toll 1,200 and Rising'), but also about the veracity of Union Carbide management's version of events. K. Gopalakrishnan ('Unskilled Workers had Cleaned Tank', 1984) reported that safety protocols in the cleaning of the MIC storage tank had been broken – 'There were no engineers present at the site as was stipulatory [sic] nor were the workers aware of any remedial procedures to be undertaken when something went wrong'. Archana Kumar (1984) wrote that none of the residents of the extensive shanty-towns that had grown up around the factory had been told by the managers what a 'long siren' (which had been sounded as the gas escaped) meant, and that when they saw the large plume of gas they had in fact run towards the factory to offer help. There was also speculation about the nature of the killer gas: was MIC fatal or were there other gases in the mix, such as phosgene and even cyanide? Furthermore, it was reported that the factory had been making huge losses and that its closure following the disaster would actually benefit Union Carbide.

Other Indian papers quickly followed with further revealing stories. The *Hindu* (1984) revealed that MIC had a cyanide base and that contrary

to what the company spokespeople were saying, it was highly toxic, with a tolerance limit as low as two parts in 100 million in air. It also pointed out that at least an hour – not 'a matter of minutes' – had passed before the leak had been brought under control. In an editorial entitled 'Playing with Poison', the *Statesman* also followed the suggestion that other gases such as phosgene may have escaped and raised the question of international corporate responsibility and the legal rights of subjects:

> Causes of the gas leakage are already being investigated, but a more basic question is whether a factory using highly toxic, indeed lethal substances liable to escape into the environment in gaseous form should have been located in a heavily populated area? … The question is especially pertinent considering that the factory belongs to a well-known multinational company.

In contrast to the Indian reportage, the American media by and large quickly fell in behind Union Carbide's line of defence. Essentially, this boiled down to two interlinked positions: first, that the accident had nothing to do with any structural deficiency or negligence on the part of the plant's American owners; second, that the accident had everything to do with the 'local', that is, Indian, failures of management and human error. Warren Anderson, the then chairman of the Union Carbide corporation summed this up in two statements: 'Our safety standards in the U.S. are identical to those in India … same equipment, same design, same everything' and 'You can't run a $9 or $10 billion corporation all out of Danbury … Lines of communication were broken at the Bhopal plant. Compliance with these procedures is the responsibility of the plant operators' (Everest 1986, pp. 18–19). Not only did the American media fail to investigate Anderson's claims, they amplified the implications of his message manifold. The *Wall Street Journal* and the *New York Times* unequivocally blamed the accident on Indian failure to live with advanced technology ('hazardous facilities often pose added risks in developing nations, where skilled labour and public understanding are often lacking', pronounced the *New York Times*) (ibid.) Indeed, the *Wall Street Journal* trumpeted the cause of Union Carbide long and hard. Sometimes it implied that the cost of the Bhopal tragedy was well worth paying for the general benefit of Union Carbide, to India and the world:

> With recriminations flying, it is worthwhile to remember that the Union Carbide Insecticide plant and the people surrounding it were

> there for compelling reasons. India's agriculture had been thriving, bringing a better life to millions of rural people … Indians need technology. Calcutta-style scenes of human deprivation can be replaced as fast as the country imports the benefits of the West's industrial revolution and market economics.
>
> (cited in Everest 1986, pp. 107–8)

At other times it vigorously blamed alleged Indian nationalism for the tragedy, suggesting that it was the Indian government that prevented the appropriate level of American control over the factory: 'when control over an affiliate is diluted … fewer resources are typically committed by the parent' (cited in ibid., p. 120).

These divergences in the immediate Indian and American responses to the Bhopal tragedy point not only to different interests and understandings of responsibilities and rights on the part of transnational companies and national subjects, but also, as we shall see, to differences concerning the most basic ideas about the web of human and non-human relationships that comprises the environment. Investigative efforts by American and international journalists in the years following the tragedy have supported the hunches of the Indian newspapers. For example, although doctors and scientists 'friendly' to the corporation declared that MIC was non-toxic, it has been established that MIC's threshold limit value, or 'how much a worker supposedly can breathe safely in eight hours', is .02 parts per million, making it five times deadlier than phosgene. Again, although there was no doubt that there was human error involved in the accident – an untrained worker forgot to use slip bind to ensure that water could not contaminate the MIC storage tank while flushing the process filters – what Union Carbide's spokespeople did not reveal was that the chemicals in storage tank 610 were already contaminated and toxic because the refrigeration unit had been shut down five months before to save expense. The temperature in the tank, instead of staying within the recommended zero to five degree centigrade band, was hovering between 15 and 20 degrees (Everest 1986, pp. 22–6). These investigative efforts began to yield a picture that not only revealed the corporation's responsibility for the immediate tragedy, but that also demonstrated a systematic and structural assault on Bhopal's environment (and of India more generally, and to some extent also in the USA) in pursuit of short-term profits.

Union Carbide's growth as a corporation is a beautiful illustration of the mechanism of what has been dubbed the 'military-industrial

complex'. It began as a specialist in the manufacturing of helium gas used in the observation balloons which were floated to fix targets for the artillery barrages of the First World War. Twenty or so years later, during the Second World War, it was involved in the US 'Manhattan Project', whose goal was the production of the atomic bomb (Lapierre and Moro 2002, pp. 32–3). In the era of the Cold War, it branched out into the manufacturing of pesticides and later plastic goods, photo plates and films and became a gigantic multinational success story. By the mid-1970s, when it planned and executed its arrival in Bhopal, the corporation had 130 subsidiaries in forty countries, 120,000 employees and an annual turnover of $6.5 billion (ibid.) At the time of the Bhopal disaster, it was the thirty-fifth largest US industrial company with $11 billion in assets and $9.5 billion in sales. Its Indian subsidiary was the fortieth largest industrial business in the country, with annual profits of $8.8 million (Everest 1986, pp. 20–1). Union Carbide arrived in India and Bhopal surrounded by an aura of 'first-world' technical and commercial efficiency, and used this, along with financial sweeteners, to retain full control of its operations in the country. It routinely promised to increase by many times the annual crop yield of India, which was seen as the first condition for lifting the country out of its postcolonial dependency. Contrary to the 'damaging nationalism' line pursued by the *Wall Street Journal* and the *New York Times* in their complaints of the dilution of American excellence in the darkness of the 'third-world', Union Carbide was exempt from the usual 1973 Indian Foreign Exchange Regulations rule that limited foreign capital to no more than 40 per cent ownership of Indian subsidiaries. Arguing that it employed advanced technology and would contribute substantially to foreign-exchange earnings, the corporation retained 51 per cent ownership of its Indian operations (Everest 1986, p. 126).

Unfortunately, the much-trumpeted advanced technology of which the corporation boasted had many false notes, although these were little heard in either India or the USA itself. Warren Anderson had boldly stated that his corporation's investment in safety measures and standards was identical across the world. What he did not say was why this should be worrying news for the inhabitants of all those territories which flew the flag of Union Carbide. In the United States's Kanawha valley, where the corporation's main research institute was situated, cancer rates were 21 per cent higher than the national average and Union Carbide had been fined for dumping carcinogenic waste into the Kanawha river. Two reports into the MIC production process by the Mellon Institute, in 1963 and 1970, found that when subjected to heat,

the chemical broke down into potentially lethal gaseous molecules that included hydrocyanide acid. Between 1980 and 1984, the US Federal Environmental Protection Agency logged sixty-seven leakages from the MIC units of Union Carbide's research laboratories (Lapierre and Moro 2002, pp. 46–56).

If it was bad at home, when it came to its global subsidiary interests, Union Carbide's sole focus seems to have been on making maximum profits more or less regardless of the cost in environmental damage. Consider the sensitive issue of MIC storage in factories situated in populated areas. Edward Munoz, a former managing director of Union Carbide's Indian subsidiary, confessed that he had argued for 'token storage' – small amounts in individual containers – but had been overruled by the corporation's American engineers who preferred large bulk storage tanks to cut down the cost of production (Everest 1986, p. 31). When Munoz compared this practice with French and German producers of MIC, he recalls being told 'Your engineers are out of their minds. They're putting an atom bomb in the middle of your factory that could explode at any time' (Lapierre and Moro 2002, p. 95). On one occasion, Union Carbide had transported a potentially lethal cargo of several hundred barrels of MIC in fragile (and in one case, leaking) containers from Bombay to Bhopal, a distance of 530 miles. The barrels were roped together in the back of rickety trucks that wove through the dense traffic of several Indian cities and villages (Lapierre and Moro, pp. 118–9).

These were more than callous oversights; they were practices that illuminate the structural logic of the corporation's existence in India. As Larry Everest points out, safety measures account for 15 to 30 per cent of the cost of setting up plants, and during economic downturns companies aggressively cut back on these in order to secure their profit margins (1986, p. 36). By 1984, the profits of the Bhopal unit of Union Carbide were falling steadily. Licensed to produce 5250 tons of pesticide per year, the plant was now producing only 1657 tons. Its losses for the year stood at $4,069,442 (Chouhan et al. 1994, p. 19). The company's response, predictably, was ruthlessly to cut jobs and to stop investing in safety measures. Permanent employment was cut from 850 to 642, and in the MIC production unit, it was halved, down from twelve to six operators and supervisors per shift (Everest 1986, p. 46; Lapierre and Moro 2002, p. 205).

The first dismal results of these measures, unsurprisingly, were felt by the workers themselves. P.R. Koshe, a worker at the MIC unit recalled

being regularly exposed to MIC, napthol dust and carbon tetrachloride solvent and 'experiencing indigestion, choking, giddiness and vomiting' (Chouhan et al. 1994, p. 92). In December 1981, Ashraf Lala, another worker, died after inhaling phosgene. True to form, Union Carbide blamed the dead worker for removing his gas mask, but his co-workers pointed out that storage of phosgene was prohibited when the plant was not in production and no one had warned Ashraf before he went on cleaning duties there (Chouhan et al. 1994, p. 34). After Ashraf's death, the workers' union put up 6000 posters warning the citizens of Bhopal about the goings-on in the factory and, as a result, suffered systematic harassment (Everest 1986, pp. 50–2). In many ways, the stories of the Union Carbide workers are chronicles of deaths of 4 December 1984 foretold.

Union Carbide did its best, before and after the disaster of December 1984, to censor the voices of the suffering. Not content with harassing and firing troublesome workers and blaming individual human errors for the tragedy, in 1988 they hired a business expert decisively to silence any dissident narratives that challenged Carbide's own explanations. Ashok Kalelkar, a representative of the management consultancy Arthur D. Little, presented his analysis of the Bhopal tragedy based on the premise that 'there is a reflexive tendency among plant workers everywhere to attempt to divorce themselves from the events surrounding any incident and to distort or omit facts to serve their own purposes' (Chouhan et al. 1994, p. 11). The reply of the Union Carbide workers of Bhopal, compiled by T.R. Chouhan et al. decisively dismantled this allegation. Instead of divorcing themselves from the 'incident', the workers, through a painstaking analysis of facts, were able to show that the very mode of their embedding in the machinations of a multinational corporation ensured disaster for Bhopal. Chouhan and his colleagues documented the distance between the enlightened theories of business practice that were churned out by the corporation's American headquarters, and the realities on the ground. For example, while the Indian floor managers were dazzled in training by the detailed model of the plant's technological sophistication and safety measures, in practice they found 'in all systems of the plant … design modifications were made in response to operational problems'. Ignorant contract workers were made to crush toxic chemicals like x-napthol with their hands, little realizing that they were doing permanent damage to their livers and kidneys. After the drastic cut in the number of workers, major maintenance jobs had to be done in one rather than three shifts (ibid., pp. 25–36). Tellingly, the workers pointed out that it was not them, but

the senior management who were divorced from the incident by dint of their location, 'far removed from the risks of the technologies that bring them wealth'.

The legal battle that followed the Bhopal tragedy had most obviously to do with the issues of accountability and compensation, but the various deadlocks it produced extended the grim illustration of the global dispensation. Union Carbide first argued that as an American multinational it could neither be charged nor tried in India, and then, memorably, that American courts and juries could not try it because they would not be able to comprehend the reality of daily life in India:

> Indeed, the practical impossibility for American courts and juries, imbued with U.S. cultural values, living standards and expectations, to determine damages for people living in the slums or 'hutments' surrounding the UCIL plant in Bhopal, India, by itself confirms that the Indian forum is overwhelmingly the most appropriate [for the legal trial of the case]. Such abject poverty and the vastly different values, standards and expectations which accompany it are commonplace in India and the third world. They are incomprehensible to Americans living in the United States.
>
> (Everest 1986, p. 155)

This legal defence is in effect a philosophical position that assumes an unbridgeable gap between two apparently discontinuous worlds. What is human in one, is not so in the other. What is understood as the environment in one, is incomprehensible in the other. The spurious logic of this position is not difficult to unpick, but it does raise important questions about specificity and universality and their conceptual importance in the environmental and human/non-human rights debate that we will look at shortly.

Armed with this position Union Carbide continued to defy all attempts to be brought to court. The Indian forum, they may have conceded, was the most appropriate for legal redress, but at the same time they argued that it had no jurisdiction over the corporation. Alongside this, they used their US government contacts and financial power to put pressure on the governments of India and Bhopal to accept a scandalously low out of court settlement. The Indian ruling classes were only too happy to oblige. In 1984, after the dead bodies had barely been discharged from the morgues, police attacked gas victims who were demonstrating against compromise settlements and arrested volunteer doctors

who were administering free medicine to the victims. Yogesh Jain, one of these volunteers, recalls being locked up and beaten by the police for daring to give sodium thiosulphate to the victims. These doctors incurred the particular wrath of Union Carbide and the corporation's powerful Indian friends, as their treatment of the patients confirmed that cyanide had been one of the killer gases that escaped from the Bhopal factory (Asia-Pacific People's Network 1985, p. 96). In 1986, Union Carbide offered $500 million against the dropping of all charges, but popular outrage prevented this deal from being clinched. Next year, an Indian judge passed an order directing Union Carbide to pay Rs. 350 crore as interim relief, but an interim order could not force the corporation to pay and it predictably refused to do so. In 1988, a British television company made an investigative film, *The Betrayal of Bhopal* (see Chouhan et al. 1994, p. 135), which documented the details of Union Carbide's cost-cutting, design deficiencies and neglect of safety measures. The corporation promptly issued misinformation about the film crew staging fake demonstrations and filming without permission. Finally, in 1989, Union Carbide's offer of a 'full and final settlement' of $470 million, lower than the original offer, was, somewhat surprisingly, accepted by the Indian state. This sum gave an average of Rs. 10,000 (around $3000 in today's money) to every human victim. Naturally, this disgraceful deal was rejected by the victim's organizations, which have continued to agitate for justice and proper compensation. However, by 1992 it was already clear that neither would be forthcoming; the USA was threatening the Indian government that should it press ahead with its efforts to extradite the management of Union Carbide to face charges in Indian courts, it would carry out an economic assault on the country under its 'Special 301' trade provisions. As Praful Bidwai commented, 'The Bhopal victims have become a mere footnote to a sordid story of transfer of money from one group of vested interests – Carbide or the Government – to another' (Chouhan et al. 1994, p. 170).

I have dwelt at some length on the story of the Bhopal gas disaster because it provides a microcosm of some of the core issues of our discussion. Where does postcoloniality figure in the current environmental debate? And how should it figure? The 'vested interests' that Bidwai talks about unite Carbide, the US and Indian governments and multinational drug companies against the impoverished victims of Bhopal. Mira Sadgopal, an activist and a legal expert clearly expresses this when she reflects on her experience of dealing with Carbide's representatives: 'Ultimately, the thing I feel again and again is that they have utter disregard and utter disrespect for people whom they don't

like … these poor people' (Asia-Pacific People's Network 1985, p. 44). What does this tell us about India's status as a postcolonial nation in the so-called 'new world order'? Again, how do we conceptualize accountability for massive amounts of toxic environmental pollution? Ashay Chitra, a film-maker from Bhopal homes in on this question in an angry outburst: 'One wants to get back at these people in some way … that very night and that whole week I was not as angry with carbide as I was with this State government or the administration. Because after all, you elect them into power. You don't elect Union Carbide into power' (ibid., p. 32).

In an age when the financial interests of the ruling elites of the global superpowers are protected by blatant military and non-military measures (such as the global trade agreements with measures like the US 'Super 301' provision), how meaningful are acts such as national elections and local community empowerment? When the rationale of globalized corporations such as Union Carbide can be expressed in a philosophy of the division of the world into mutually incompatible sectors, how can one think in term of universals, common rights and a shared environment? 'Human beings are our most precious asset', states the preamble to Union Carbide's 'mission statement', which goes on boldly to say 'and their health and safety are therefore our number one priority' (Lapierre and Moro 2002, p. 140). Clearly, this cannot be describing those same humans who perished and who were maimed in their thousands or tens of thousands as a result of the structural logic of profit maximization that drove the corporation. What does it take to be 'human' and what are we to make of those who fall outside this category? Indra Sinha's novel attempts to embrace this entire gamut of problems thrown up by the Bhopal disaster, and does so through the gambit of making his narrator a human being who has abdicated the notion of being human. He has chosen to be an animal.

'Definitely the right animal'

'I used to be human once.' So begins Sinha's narrator, whose voice reaches us through a series of tapes transcribed by an unnamed editor. Later he entertains an American doctor by singing a fierce little song about himself that begins 'I am an animal fierce and free / in all the world is none like me' (Sinha 2007, pp. 1 and 172). Animal's proclamation of his identity gives voice to a scandal that lurks behind the tragedy of Bhopal: if there are those who, by dint of their underprivileged location in the hierarchy of the 'new world order', cannot access the

minimum of the rights and privileges that are said to define 'humanity', what can they be called? It also gives voice to a further question: what happens when the rights and privileges of humans are achieved at the expense of the sufferings of the majority of non-human beings that surround them and define their environment?

These questions, which often appear under the broader terms of the non-human or animal rights debate, have come to assume an important place in environmentalist discussions. Sinha's genius is to show the historical and material forces, here dramatized in the Bhopal tragedy, which charge such questions about the fundamental composition of identities and beings. For example, the media coverage about the non-human casualties of the Bhopal disaster remained mute in the immediate aftermath. Indian newspapers such as the *Hindu* did describe the city's streets 'littered with dead cats, dogs, buffaloes and birds', but by and large they focused on the human victims ('350 killed', 1984). It was during the compensation debates that the issue of animal and non-human casualties came up again. It was pointed out that the oil company Exxon had been compelled to spend \$1.28 billion in cleaning up the oil spilled from its tanker *Exxon Valdez*, and that it had on average spent \$40,000 on every sea otter affected by the spill (Chouhan et al. 1994, p. 143). Naturally, Bhopal's human victims wanted to know why they were valued to the tune of around \$30,000 less than a sea otter by another multinational company. Through his central character, Animal, Sinha shows the intricate and symbiotic linkages between historical forces, environmental degradation and the question of the differential valuation of beings. The debate about non-human/animal rights is complex, though, and we should at least familiarize ourselves with its main outlines before we can gauge how Sinha incorporates these in the life of his Animal.

One classic argument for extending human rights to non-humans and animals has been to point out the central contradiction that lies at the heart of the concept of rights itself. As Paola Cavalieri (2003, p. 30) shows, the ideas underlying rights are negative and institutional and based on a definition of humans as 'intentional beings and agents' who 'fulfil the requisite of intentionality [and] are characterized by the capacity to enjoy freedom and welfare'. Clearly, if the intention to enjoy freedom and welfare qualifies one to possess rights, then the rights cannot be confined to humanity itself. On the one hand, many non-humans possess the cognitive and emotive intentionality to enjoy freedom and welfare; on the other hand, many humans, because of congenital or accidental disabilities, do not. Along with the question

of universal rights, this line of thinking also throws open the question of what it is to be human. For Peter Singer, who uses a neo-Benthamite argument to propose an extension of the principle of equality (but not rights, since he has a problem with the conceptualization of rights) to all humans and non-humans, the simple reason for extending this principle beyond the human species lies in the fact that it implies that: 'our concern for others ought not to depend on what they are like, or what abilities they possess … the fact that beings are not members of our species does not entitle us to exploit them, and similarly the fact that other people are less intelligent than we are does not mean that their interests may be disregarded' (Singer 2003, p. 33).

So, if it is not on the criteria of rationality or intelligence or species membership that the principle of equality (and the rights that are derived from it) ought to depend, what is to lie at its core? For Singer, the answer is provided by the utilitarian philosopher Jeremy Bentham in his treatise on *Principles of Morals and Legislation*. Here, looking forward to the day when animals would acquire those rights 'which never could have been witholden to them but by the hands of tyranny', Bentham pinpoints the common feature between human and non-human beings that overrides all the other apparent differences between them – 'The question is not, can they *reason*? Nor can they *talk*? but, can they *suffer*?' (cited in Singer 2003, p. 35). It is on this universality of suffering that Indra Sinha's Animal will issue his call for equality and justice.

Non-human and animal rights debates, then, ask us to make a fundamental reassessment of our understanding of being, belonging and collectivity. How difficult or necessary is it to imagine a commonality with beings whose physical features and cognitive capacities seem to be so radically different from the normative concept of being human? As Paul Shepard (2003, p. 512) reminds us, 'Wild animals are not our friends. They are uncompromisingly not us nor mindful of us, just as they differ among themselves … We cannot comprehend the world as it is experienced by a bat, a termite, or a squid.' The trick then, is to imagine a principle of equality based on difference, rather than normative homogeneity or similarity. Quite often, this attention to difference takes the form of imagining different forms of individual identity or personhood. Arguing his case for primate intersubjectivity, Juan Carlos Gomez (2003, p. 138) suggests that we need to modify our prevalent idea of what constitutes a person, which relies on the possession of two clusters of cognitive features: being an intentional agent and being able to understand that others are intentional agents as well. We need to

recognize, Gomez suggests, that it is entirely possible to engage in acts of mutual recognition without understanding the intentionality of others as 'internal mental states'. By taking the case of visual communication in great apes and human infants, Gomez demonstrates that beings do not need to recognize the minds of others to acknowledge mutual personhood; they need only a definite understanding of physical distinctness and social subjectivity (p. 140). As long as we can comprehend each other as having separate physical existences and social interdependence, we can see each other as persons.

The question of personhood is also addressed by Martha Nussbaum's 'capabilities approach' to determining the moral status of animals. Nussbaum asks 'What are people actually able to do and to be' and then develops ten areas to which each person should be entitled in order to attain their capabilities, including life, health, bodily integrity and affiliation (2007, p. 31). Of course, the taking of capabilities as a criterion immediately rules out the confining of personhood just to normative adult humans. Nussbaum's 'dignity of a form of life that possesses both deep needs and abilities' would include all living creatures who have innate capacity for some actions which are important and good for itself and for those around it. In addition, Sarah Whatmore has called for a reconfiguration of the concept of agency (the capacity to act, which is central to our idea of personhood) in order to expand our understanding of personhood. A proponent of Actant Network Theory, which holds that 'the erasure of "nonhuman" agency is an effect of particular, and partial, configuration of social practice and discourse', Whatmore suggests that we view agency as 'a relational effect generated by a network of heterogeneous, interacting components'. Non-human agents are vital to the functioning of this network, since 'they attach us to one another … and define our social bond by their very circulation' (2007, pp. 340–1).

Along with personhood, these theories of the non-human, then, ask us to reconfigure our ideas about commonality, relationality and universality. It is easy to see why these ideas have been crucial to a reconceptualization of the environment. They ensure that it is no longer possible to see 'nature' or 'environment' as something that exists out there, outside the realm of the human or the social. Rather, environment must be seen as a mutually sustaining network in which humans and non-humans are always already linked with each other, and on whose collective action and prosperity the functioning of the network depends. Of course, these ideas of environment as a

relationship of beings with equal stakes in it is not new. We have seen in the earlier chapters how early socialist theorists conceived of a relational account of 'nature' and 'culture' based on a radical understanding of labour. Ted Benton has argued that the 'naturalist' position of early Marx is precisely the philosophical antecedent of contemporary theories such as those outlined by, for example, Nussbaum and Whatmore. Benton shows that Marx's core theory of alienated labour necessarily had a 'naturalist' dimension: 'In separating individual life from the life of the species, and inverting their proper relationship to one another, the estrangement of labour imposes upon humanity a mode of existence in which its distinctive species attributes cannot be manifested' (1993, p. 27).

According to Benton, what this material alienation strengthened was the anthropocentric philosophy that saw species as mutually exclusive; conflated intra-species differences, especially on the animal side of the divide in order to represent them as homogeneous; continuously reconceptualized powers that define the human, such as language, to shore up the always threatened boundary between humans and animals; and ontologically and morally privileged these 'human' powers over the 'needs, powers, and liabilities of humans that they share with many other species' (Benton 1993, p. 17). Marx's 'naturalist' account of labour shows us that 'human beings are … ecologically and socially embedded'. It yields a philosophical standpoint that has evolved into one of the cornerstones of the environmental debate. Some of the key features of this position are that humans and non-humans stand in social relationships, that these social relationships are extremely diverse, and that humans and non-humans are socially and ecologically interdependent (ibid., p. 68).

Personhood, relationality and universality are, then, aspects of the animal rights debate that also lie at the heart of a rethinking about the environment. Further, these concepts achieve their proper charge when allied to ideas of universal rights and principles of equality. Indra Sinha's Animal brings the whole range of these issues to the fore in his declaration that he is a 'non-human'. His scarred and deformed existence, his vehement denial of belonging to the human species, at first seems to confirm Union Carbide's historical defence that rights are for those humans who possess the power and wealth. The rest, humans and non-humans alike, are not entitled to any of these rights – not to health, not to life, not to affiliation. If this were so, Animal would be no more than a cry of despair hideously embodied. Yet, as Zafar, Animal's friend and activist for justice in Bhopal says to him as he lies close to

death – 'Well my brother … [you are] definitely the right animal' (Sinha 2007, p. 303). Wherein lies this sense of rightness? Can Animal's declaration also be heard as one of defiant belonging? Can Bhopal mark not merely the nightmare of mutual antagonism but also the beginning of a sense of community? We turn next to look at Animal in some detail in the light of these questions.

'In all the world is none like me'

The historical Bhopal is called Khaufpur in Sinha's novel. The gift that the poisoned air brings to Animal, a teenager orphaned by the gas tragedy, is not merely a hideously deformed back that forces him to crawl on his hands, but also his new identity as a non-human being. From ground level, he casts an eye on the human world with Swiftian disgust – 'The world of humans is meant to be viewed from eye level. Your eyes. Lift up my head I'm staring into someone's crotch … I know which one hasn't washed his balls, I can smell pissy gussets and shitty backsides … farts smell extra bad' (p. 2). From this perspective, Animal has developed a sense of absolute difference from those humans who are powerful enough to possess abstractions such as 'rights' and 'justice'. Addressing the Australian journalist who gives him a recorder to tape his story, he says as much – 'many books have been written about this place … You will bleat like all the rest. You'll talk of *rights*, *law*, *justice*. Those words sound the same in my mouth as in yours but they don't mean the same' (p. 3). Animal's statement serves to confirm the absolute breach, premised on the power that confers entitlement to rights, between some humans and others that is the logical extension of Union Carbide's legal historical defence. Yet, it soon becomes apparent that Animal's sense of absolute difference from humans has gradations built into it. He senses that his distance from the Australian journalist, for example, is greater than that from his fellow gas victims and the destitute in Bhopal. When asked to imagine the world's eyes opened by his story, he mocks – 'What can I say that they will understand? Have these thousands of eyes slept even one night in a place like this?… When was the last time these eyes had nothing to eat? These cuntish eyes, what do they know of our lives?' Both distance and proximity are heartfelt here – distance from the global would-be consumers of his story, and the closeness felt with the destitute captured in the 'we' of the sentence.

But Animal is surrounded by humans who deny his non-humanity. Zafar asks him to think of himself as 'especially able' and says he should

think of himself as a human being entitled to dignity and respect. Farouq thinks his self-proclaimed identity is just an excuse to evade social responsibility:

> Trouble with you, Animal … is you think because you've a crooked back and walk with your arse in the air no one should dare criticise you. I'm an animal, always you're bleating … I don't have to do like the rest of you, laws of society don't apply to me because I'm such a fucking animal.
>
> (p. 87)

If we think in terms of the non-human/animal rights argument that we looked at earlier, it is not surprising that Animal's nature is the subject of debate. Sinha freights Animal with exaggerated amounts of both the 'liabilities and powers' that non-humans share with humans and the 'human-definitive' features that mark the acts of species boundary-making. Roaming the desperate margins of Khaufpur, Animal's remarkable capacity for survival finds its most memorable expression in his twin drives towards copulation and feeding. A scavenger, there is nothing that Animal will not eat in order to stay alive, including bits of himself:

> Inside of left foot, outer of right, where they scrape the ground the skin's thick and cracked. In gone times I've felt such hunger, I'd break off lumps of the dry skin and chew it … I am reaching down to my heel, feeling for the horny edges, I'm sliding the thumbnail under. There, see this lump of skin, hard as a pebble, how easily it breaks off, mmm, chewy as a nut. Nowadays there's no shortage of food, I eat my feet for pleasure.
>
> (p. 13)

It is while scavenging that he forms an unshakeable bond with Jara, 'a yellow dog, of no fixed abode and no traceable parents'. As they fight for bits of banana skin, nubs of meat and flecks of fish in the rubbish dumps, Animal is initially scared of Jara's sharp teeth, orange-brown eyes and snarling, growling mouth until one day something snaps in him and he charges at her on all fours, 'growling louder than she, the warning of a desperate animal that will stick at nothing' (p. 17). 'Non-human' bond established, the pair remains inseparable for the rest of the narrative.

Animal is also, as Farouq puts it, 'made like a donkey'. For much of the book, his priapic urges mark his isolation from the world of humans who play by the intricate rules of their erotic conventions. Sensing that he is locked out of this world, Animal takes refuge in frequent masturbation and fantasies about the women who befriend him. These acts seem to enhance his non-human nature in the eyes of his human associates. When they urge him to spy on Elli, the American doctor, naked in her bath, they ask him to climb the mango tree like a baboon and a monkey. Animal, hidden amongst the branches, observes Elli but instead of relaying the details about her body to his audience below, he thinks about the predicament of his own liminality: 'Animal mating with human female, it's unnatural, but I've no choice but to be unnatural. Many times I would dream that she and I were in love, sometimes we were married and naked together like in the movies having sex … This frightened me, I despise hope' (p. 78).

If hunting for food and incessant, but lonely sex, mark Animal's non-human nature, his linguistic prowess and capacity to imagine the minds of other humans seem to mark his 'human-definitive' powers. Animal chatters in a polyglot mixture of Hindi, Urdu, 'local' Bhojpuri, English and French. His clever tongue, he says, 'could curl itself into any language'. While the poison gas deprived others, such as the French nun Ma Franci, of their linguistic ability, it seems to have made Animal, as Zafar notes, 'especially able'. It makes him the translator par excellence in Khaufpur's cosmopolitan world of local activists, visiting Australian journalists, American doctors and French nuns. It is his linguistic glue, as it were, that holds together the threads of the relationships around him. Animal explains that like all good translators, he can sense linguistic meanings even when he is unfamiliar with the words – 'When ma shouted, *sallo purqwateu na parlapa lalang yumain?*, I had no idea what the sounds meant, but I knew what *she* meant.' It is, of course, his linguistic ability that helps him gain the confidence of Elli, who is suspected of working for the 'Kampani' (Union Carbide) and is boycotted when she arrives to open a free medical centre in Khaufpur. It is this that gives him the upper hand in the bargaining about his story with the Australian journalist – while Animal can understand what he is saying, there is no way for him to understand how Animal mocks him with obscene songs and taunts. Animal succeeds in getting the coveted pair of shorts, a cigarette-lighter and a tape-recorder from the journalist, in return of a promise to deliver his stories to him, which he does not. It is a small victory against the 'world of eyes' – humans who possess the power to destroy his world.

Not only is Animal linguistically gifted, but he possesses that other requirement that Daniel Dennett posits as a condition of personhood – the ability to recognize the 'inner minds' of other persons. In fact, Animal has this in uncanny abundance – 'Since I was small I could hear people's thoughts even when their lips were shut, plus I'd get en passant comments from all types of things, animals, birds, trees, rocks giving the time' (p. 8). Further, he can visualize these thoughts of others; literally, he can see the world as they see it. When Elli expresses her shock at the destitution of Khaufpur, Animal can temporarily see his own environment as it appears to Elli: 'When Elli says *earthquake* suddenly I am seeing it as she does. Paradise Alley is a wreckage of baked earth mounds and piles of planks on which hang gunny sacks … Everywhere's covered in shit and plastic. Truly I see how poor and disgusting are our lives' (p. 106).

This combination of linguistic precocity and intense recognition of the inner life of others enables Animal to adopt a 'transpersonality', whereby he can experience the objective existence of his entire environment of Khaufpur as a network composed of related subjects, including himself. This transpersonality can often shape his narrative style, for example, when his first-person perspective demonstrates qualities more usually associated with a third-person omniscient narrator:

> Bird that I am sees all, white palace of gone rulers on hill, lake looks pale green from up here, eye slides along a road lined with dirty buildings … Far below, an animal is moving slowly along a lane. What kind of creature is this, arse canted steeply into the air? Dromedary? Centaur? Short way behind a smaller, also non-human being strolls, stopping now and again to stretch sleepy jaws.
>
> (p. 133)

Animal embodies exaggerated qualities of both human and non-human personhood. We could say that he is the location where these meet, and as such, his very existence is an argument for their continuity and their ontological equality. Animal is able to mediate not merely between humans of various kinds, but also between non-humans and humans. For some reviewers and critics, this has made him a less effective character than he might have been. Lucy Beresford feared that 'Sinha's flirtation with magical realism, conveying Animal's ability to converse with foetuses, and the musings of several delirious or psychotic characters, might not be to every reader's taste' (Beresford 2007). But Sinha's understanding of the Bhopal tragedy as a site that releases

a debate about the fundamental essence or being of humans requires a figure such as Animal, hovering between the worlds of the human and non-human and making apparent the umbilical ties that bind both. Animal's conversations with the deformed, aborted foetuses, for example, are perfectly consistent with the logic of Sinha's vision. This is hardly 'magic realism' in the gimmicky, negative sense of the term, but realism fit to express the horrors of a reality that threatens to escape the ordinary boundaries of stylistics.

Animal first meets Kha-in-the-jar, as he calls the foetus with two heads, when he is in the chambers of a doctor where Ma Franci has taken him to see if his own deformity can be cured. Busy translating Ma's French for the doctor, and his Hindi for Ma, Animal quickly realizes that the two-headed foetus floating in the preservative is asking to be freed from his confinement. Animal and Kha mirror each other in that they have both been placed beyond the pale of normative humanity by the Kampani's poison gas. But as Kha points out, Animal is at least alive while he is 'fucking waiting to be born' (Sinha 2007, p. 58). Kha holds that while all beings on earth have imbibed some of the poison, him and his fellow foetuses, beside being the youngest of the victims, embody the principle of opposition to the Kampani whose mission is 'To undo everything that the company does. Instead of breaking ground for new factories to grow grass and trees over the old ones, instead of making new poisons, to make medicines' (p. 237). The release of Kha from the jar will be a part of the defiance of those whom Animal calls the people of the apocalypse against the others who have destroyed them.

Animal's final wandering in the jungle after he has attempted to poison himself, and his hallucinatory communication with trees, the moon and animals, have attracted criticism for an allegedly heavy-handed Christian allegory of resurrection. Yet, in the novel's schema, this episode is crucial for establishing the principle of 'different-yet-equal' that represents the philosophical cornerstone of the environmental and non-human/human rights debate. After repeatedly asserting his separation from humans, Animal must also come to terms with his difference from other non-humans. The trees don't feel his pain and as he screams abuse at them they reply that he doesn't scare them. When he captures a lizard for food, it pleads to be spared. When released, it says 'You are human, if you were an animal you would have eaten me' (p. 346). This sensation of being different from both humans and animals gives rise, at first, to a defiant assertion of monadic isolation in Animal: 'If this self of mine doesn't belong in this world, I'll be mine own world … I, the

universe that was once called Animal, sit in the tree and survey the moonlit jungles of my kingdom' (p. 350). But this acceptance of himself as he is, and the realization that others – humans and non-humans, 'local' Khaufpuris and cosmpolitan Americans – do the same, soon gives rise to a sense of positive difference. Zafar, Farouq, Jara the dog and others find him after days of searching the forest. As they leave, 'The animals that were absent before now choose to show themselves … Birds we see, deer in the distance … by a place where water is running's laid a long white snake skin, perfect from nostril to tip of tail' (p. 357). This vision of collectivity, one where personhood remains distinctive yet always relational, is a site from where the struggle for recognition and justice can begin. The novel closes with Animal deciding not to go to the USA for an operation that would straighten his spine, since he does not need to do this now in order to belong. His sense of 'people', one suspects, is composed precisely of the humans and non-humans who unite in celebration of his rescue from the forest. He leaves us with his defiant reminder – 'tomorrow there will be more of us'.

However, this arrival at an ontological sense of collectivity and equality does not, in Sinha's novel, automatically replace the actually existing material reality that conspires to prevent the proper achievement of these ideals. Rather, as Sinha, following the historical lessons of the Bhopal tragedy, shows, a modicum of these can only be attained over and against the prevailing condition of the world. Animal's personal journey from identification with the non-humans to a realization of a relational humanity also serves partially to bridge the divided and conflicted communities that surround him. Sinha, like Arundhati Roy, is not hesitant about naming the source of this divisive and conflicted state of affairs – the corrosive short-term greed and drive for profit that is embodied in the contemporary multinational corporations. The global reach of these institutions means the receding of 'local' or 'national' interests and the strong interconnections of the interests of cosmopolitan, national and local ruling classes against that of the overwhelming majority of the world's inhabitants. Can tragedies such as Bhopal be where the formidable boundaries erected by the contemporary global struggle fracture?

Characters located at various points of the global divide certainly express their mutual incomprehension of each other's lives. After watching the terrorist attacks in the USA on 11 September 2001 on television, Zafar intervenes in the debate about its authenticity by pointing out that 'We know zilch about their lives, they know nothing of ours, that's the problem' (p. 66). Similarly, Elli, when confronted with the

boycott of her free clinic by the Khaufpuris, is mystified: 'I swear I don't understand Khaufpur … This is the strangest thing about Khaufpur, that people put up with so much … But wait, let someone come along with an open hearted offer of help, these same citizens can't tolerate it, in fact find it so intolerable they must mount a boycott' (p. 151).

Of course, this is not just a matter of incomprehension between the gleaming USA and impoverished Khaufpur. In Khaufpur itself, there is no shortage of people on the right side of corporate capital who argue, like Elli's doctor friend, that the victims of gas were expendable because their poverty would have doomed them to an early death anyway. If anything, and in tune with the historical victims of the Bhopal tragedy, it is such members of the 'local' or 'national' ruling classes who most provoke Animal and his 'people'. When he hears an Indian lawyer defend the Kampani in court, Animal wonders 'Holy cunt, what a twisted nain rabougri is this from our own city to take the side of the Kampani?' (p. 53). When the local police force, led by a much-hated officer, beats up Nisha, her father and the demonstrators who have gathered in front of the abandoned factory to protest against the compensation deal between the Kampani and the government, Animal leads the visceral revolt (p. 313).

The bonds that bind these local elites to the Kampani are well understood by the protestors. 'Go lick the arse of your Chief Minister, who licks the hole of Peterson', they shout to the police. The Kampani's American lawyers, among them Elli's ex-husband, arrive to negotiate the deal. The gulf between their interests and the victims is illustrated when one of them complains of missing the two Italian greyhounds that sleep with him in his palatial house. How is it possible to bridge this entrenched gulf between people?

It is here that Animal's role as translator assumes paramount importance. As we have seen, the liminality accorded by the combination of his human – and non-human – definitive powers make him the ideal mediator between fractured communities. His greatest achievement is the solidarity between Elli and the Khaufpuris. When she arrives within days of a legal decision commanding the Kampani's appearance in an Indian court, she is suspected, for compelling reasons, of being a spy engaged to fabricate medical data that would help the Kampani in its legal defence. Zafar organizes a boycott of her clinic, and it is only Animal, with his non-human instinct, and Somraj, Nisha's father, who suggest that she may be a friend despite her nationality. The ensuing romance between Elli and Somraj, united by their passion for music and sense of justice, can feel contrived. But what enlivens this plotline is

Animal's struggle to trust Elli. He has been asked by Zafar to spy on her activities, but she is his only hope of being cured. His instincts tell him that she is on their side, but he sees her talking to her ex-husband, the Kampani's lawyer. Ultimately, Elli embodies a wager of faith in the novel – are beings capable of trust even when their hopes have been repeatedly and brutally destroyed? As he ferries stories of Elli's medical and musical skills and her fierce commitment to the victims of Khaufpur to his 'people', Animal's struggle to trust Elli is a proof of Zafar's dictum that a struggle based on love is stronger than one based on hope. His stories erase the Khaufpuri's mistrust of Elli, and her saving of Somraj and their eventual marriage, makes her one of them.

'There's such a thing as bhayanak rasa'

In the previous chapters, we saw how stylistic unevenness has remained a staple of critical response to the contemporary Indian novel in English. I have been arguing that instead of a negative evaluation, which tends to see it as an imperfect imitation of established Euro-north American aesthetic norms, this stylistic unevenness can be seen as the writer's response to the radically uneven historical, material environmental conditions that characterize contemporary India in the 'new world order' of multinational corporate capitalism. Now clearly, the success of this uneven style varies from novel to novel. It may even be that the extent of the stylistic unevenness may be directly proportional to the degree to which the writer is embedded in the contemporary reality of India. At any rate, it seems to me that the unevenness of say, Arundhati Roy, is different in degree but not in kind from that achieved in Sinha's novel. We have also seen that it is the fusion of the formal qualities of various kinds of new and 'archaic' cultural modes, historically existing cheek-by-jowl in India and other countries of the 'global south', which provides the key component of these authors' uneven styles. In the case of Roy, it was her use of elements of the *Kathakali* dance-drama of Kerala. For Sinha, although he is much more reticent with this move, it is north Indian classical music that provides the source of his novel's distinctive formal elements and style. I should add that, at least to my eyes, Sinha's efforts seem much more modest, stylistically and formally speaking, than is the case in some other novels. Nonetheless, north Indian classical music occupies an important thematic and (albeit less vital) formal role in Sinha's novel (and hence my judgement that it is a comparatively modest effort) and we shall conclude the chapter by looking at this.

As is the case with the other novels we have looked at, Sinha's work has attracted some debate about its stylistic merits. Apart from Beresford's unease about 'flirtations with magic realism', there have also been mutterings about Animal's 'Yoda-style speech' (Naravane 2007). Even a positive assessment, such as the one by Rimi B. Chatterjee, warns that readers will not be able to categorize the novel. Chatterjee pinpoints Animal's voice – 'peppered with expletives from three languages, in a grammar as contorted as Animal's body' – as Sinha's most innovative creation, but accurately dismisses the allegation that this amounts to a sub-Rushdian gimmick (Chatterjee 2008). Animal's voice, as we have seen, amalgamates human languages and imaginations and this, along with his non-human capabilities, makes him the mediator through whom the humans and non-humans of Sinha's world realize their relationship. As such, his voice expresses the philosophy that lies at the core of north Indian classical music and it is no accident that Sinha makes Somraj Animal's key ally; a once-famous and now traumatized classical musician, Somraj's conversations with Animal provide the readers with an analogy and a key with which to understand the purpose of Animal's voice and the meaning of his journey.

Animal himself hints that his narrative has effusions of north Indian classical music when he describes the killing grounds of the Kampani's factory in aesthetic terms of *rasa*, or mood: 'Eyes, there is such a thing as bhayaanak rasa, the kind of terror that makes your little hairs stand up and tremble, which is called romanchik … Eyes, you see a black pipe climbing into the sky, I see Siva dark and naked, smeared with ashes from the funeral pyres' (Sinha 2007, p. 32). As Animal sees it, a major task of his story is to convey this mood of sheer terror to his audience. In this – and it is clear by the term that he uses – he is very much like an Indian classical singer whose task is to pitch his melody and rhythm to express or evoke certain moods or *rasas*. This prescribed rhythmic melody is called *raga* (Wade 1976, pp. 75–6). Nor is Animal's specific musical analogy accidental. As Sinha introduces Somraj to Animal's world, it becomes clear that their sustained discussions of musicology provide us with a conceptual key to the novel.

Animal gets to know Somraj, Nisha's father, after he becomes a member of the group of activists led by Zafar, who meet frequently at Nisha's house. Once famous across India as '*Awaaz-e-Khaufpur*' (the 'sound of Khaufpur'), Somraj's lungs were damaged in the gas disaster, and he has stopped singing completely, limiting himself to teaching music to his students. However, Animal's presence unlocks memories in him, and he takes to teaching him the philosophy of north Indian classical music.

The essence of this, Somraj explains, is the assertion of the fundamental relation between all human and non-human beings and their existence as a collective, as well as the simultaneous assertion of their individuality. This simultaneous collectivity and individualism is best seen in the dialectical antinomies between musical elements. Silence, Somraj tells Animal, is what makes sound into music. While Animal cannot hear anything but the croaking of a frog looking for its mate, Somraj teaches him that in that croak lies the sixth note of the Indian classical scale. In fact, these notes exist in all beings, connecting them to each other:

> Then he says that according to the old writers, peacocks, goats and even the grey herons … too sing notes of the scale, and if you listen carefully you can hear the same notes in many other things which you wouldn't expect such as the creaking bicycle wheels and bhutt-bhutt pigs because all things make their own music.
>
> (p. 49)

Here Somraj is outlining the idea of unity composed of dualities that binds the vision of collectivity in Indian classical music. Rajeev Patke, for example, has suggested that:

> The most basic antinomy in the Indian musical traditions is contained within the idea of music as the echo of a primordial vibration [*Nada,* or vibration] that links the now of present time to the creation of the world … Music may be said to aspire to autonomy of sound, but only as musicality represents a median point between breathing and noise … the 'nom tom' solfege in the initiatory slow unmetered part of the musical composition … re-enacts the primal separation of order from noise.
>
> (Patke 2007, pp. 35–6)

If music is the echo of the cosmic signature of creation – energy – then it is not surprising that notes exist in all beings, human and non-humans. We may say that music teaches us to listen to these notes and to realize our non-alienable bonds with each other. In a novel that tells the story of a struggle against forces that seek to eliminate these bonds, Somraj's musical education proves invaluable to Animal.

The social and material expression of this Indian musical philosophy is best seen in the music's capacity to transcend communal, religious, linguistic and class-cultural divides. For example, the *ragas* of the *Dhrupad* genre that became popular in the sixteenth century were performed by both

Hindu and Muslim singers in the Mughal court (Wade 1976, pp. 159–60). The *Khyal* genre, which typically consisted of songs of praise for Krishna, a Hindu deity, was best developed by Muslim musicians (ibid., p. 170). As Pandit Amarnath, a contemporary maestro, explained, 'In Music, Hindus learning from Muslims and Muslims learning from Brahmins is common. Haridas teaches Tansen … Guru Nanak Devji always wanted to listen to music from Baba Mardana' (Chawla 2004, p. 35). In short, while much modern and contemporary Indian history is read with an emphasis on communal and religious divides, when it comes to music these divisions dissolve into a productive unity. Similarly, Indian classical music enacts the bridging of the popular/folk tradition with elite/classical practices, and of humans and their environments. Pandit Amarnath observed that 'Folk is the basis of any haunting [sic] idea behind the whole show' (Chawla 2004, p. 9). Rajeev Patke has supported this assertion and explained that although north Indian classical music appeared to grew from and out of folk music, 'forms like Dhamar, Hori, Thumri and Tappa show the relationship to be symbiotic rather than oppositional' (2007, p. 55). Again, although much of the modern and certainly a great deal of the present-day material reality of India can be seen as a depressing widening of the gulf between the elite and the popular polities, classical music expresses the actually existing connections between them. Further, in the classical tradition, the *ragas* are also understood as forms that express not merely human moods, but their relationship with the land and environment of their habitation. Explaining the melodic pitch of certain *ragas* originating in Rajasthan, Pandit Amarnath says 'you have seen how long, dry and hot it is in Rajasthan, there are storms, the sun blazes … It is the same with the raga. The raga changes its colours very boldly' (Chawla 2004, p. 13). Nor are ragas merely environmental mood music, their very styles, like other craft traditions, are determined by regional specificities:

> The culture of the area, the food of the soil, the history of the sanskaaras and particularly of their sufferings, has definitely something to do with styles … On the soil of Punjab the staple diet is wheat, milk and *ghee*. We can expect weighty voices. Weighty voices mean comparatively low pitches … pathos in the lyric.
>
> (Ibid., pp. 55–6)

In Sinha's novel, Somraj and his music embody this principle of unity through dualities in aesthetic, social, political and environmental dimensions. We hear of him singing in time to the monsoonal waves in Bombay. His room is decorated with Hindu idols and Muslim carpets

from Afghanistan and central Asia. Instead of despising the popular noise of some bass-band players, he admires their breathing technique. At the Shia Muslim Muharram festival, all he can hear in the lamenting chants are many musical forms running together. Indeed, his musical sensibility is crucial in terms of plot, as it brings him to Elli, who initially starts playing piano in order to disrupt his singing lessons as she wrongly believes that Somraj has instigated the boycott of her clinic. Instead of the desired effect, however, Somraj says he has discovered a certain beauty in the clashing of their respective musical styles.

Somraj's teachings are quickly learnt by Animal. When Elli gives him an elementary piano lesson, he quickly discovers that it is music that can provide a route through the material barriers that divide her from his world: '"This is the same as our *sa re ga*. So this one is *sa*", I've pressed a key. "Your sa is our *do*," she says … "Your *re* is our *re*. Same name, same note, they're exactly the same in both our musics"' (Sinha 2007, p. 171). It is this insight that further bolsters Animal's instincts about the possibilities of Elli's solidarity with his own 'people'. His instincts lead Zafar and others to build their bridges with Elli and strengthen the scope of their activism against the Kampani. Somraj's musical lessons are also crucial for a positive development of Animal's sense of 'personhood'. Animal's sense of difference and separation from his 'people' had always been expressed by him as a negative quality, as an assertion of despairing, defiant loneliness. But once Somraj teaches him that the first secret of Indian music lies not in the intricacy of the notes themselves, but in the measure of their difference from the constant note of *sa,* Animal can begin to appreciate the positive quality of difference, that 'you can't know what a thing is if you don't know what it isn't'. This understanding prepares him for the deeper secret of music, that all the notes of the scale are really one note, but 'bent and twisted by this world and what's in it' and that 'it's because of all music being one thing that there's music in all things' (p. 250). Ever adept at extrapolating the social and material implications of this philosophical position, Animal quickly arrives at a vision of an united world composed of a positive relationality of differences connected through labour:

> it's obvious how a world made of such music is also a world of promises made by auto-rickshaws and blacksmiths, bees, rain and railway engines, for the squeaky bicycle of Gangu who pedals round the Nutcracker selling milk would not be heard if he did not keep his promise to be a milkman … maybe there's even some kind of music to be had from potatoes and vultures.
>
> (p. 250)

Once this vision of a great chain of beings has been arrived at, it is very difficult for Animal to insist on his monadic separation from it. He struggles to hold on to this idea of simultaneous difference and singularity, buffeted by material forces that attempt to reinforce separation, but it is too powerful to be wiped away and becomes manifest in the personal and collective redemption that is at least partially achieved by the end of the narrative.

If the philosophy of north Indian classical music provides a key to the novel's imagined achievement of relationality and collectivity, some of its stylistic elements are also incorporated in Sinha's narrative. Animal's polyglot voice, using at least three languages to achieve a sustained creation of mood is very much like north Indian classical music's ability to hold a variety of folk idioms in the body of a *raga*. If the *ragas* operate through a dialectical antinomy between the various notes on the scale and the more basic one between silence and sound, Animal's occasional mixture of first- and third-person narratorial perspectives to describe himself – the fluctuations between 'I' and 'they' – gestures towards the same kind of dialectical antinomy to demonstrate a sense of transpersonality. Some portions of the text seem to mimic the musical performance of a *raga*, where a variety of notes move away from a central, constant one to create a particular mood. When Animal finds himself alongside Somraj at the Muslim festival of Muharram, which in Kaufpur is marked by a fire-walking ritual, he first grasps the meaning of the mournful music called Marsiya that is being sung in a mixture of Hindi, Arabic and Persian:

> It's like every good thing in the world is dying … The mourners are defiant, never will they give in to evil powers. For me, who am neither Muslim, nor Hindu, nor Isaiy, this is a music that could also comfort Isa miyan dying on the cross or go with Sri Rama into exile from Ayodhya. It's all one to me.
>
> (p. 215)

But very quickly, this mood of the essential unity of beings is translated into the narration of the scene of the fire-walking itself, where a recurring central note of the Marsiya holds the flow of Animal's thoughts about another fire on another night that destroyed much of Khaufpur:

> What must it have been like, that inferno? *O who will speak now for the orphans?* She has heard so many stories of that night, so many accounts of that vast slaughter of innocents. *Who now will speak for*

> *the poor?* What must have been the terror of waking in the dead of night, blinded by the acrid gas *who will protect these wretched ones* running out into the night gulping fumes that tore and burned your insides *where now will they find refuge*.
>
> (p. 219)

This extended passage, which carries on for a further couple of pages, achieves its most immediate effect in the accurate recreation of the hypnotic rhythm that the combination of mass ritual and music instils in Animal. But it is also an echo of stylistics of north Indian classical musical performance, the Marsiya chants acting as the central, repetitive *sa,* and Animal's traumatized imaginings about the night of the accident as the notes arranged around it to create a *raga* of, as Animal calls it, *bhayanak rasa* – the mood of terror.

'Tomorrow there will be more of us'

Sinha's novel attempts a visceral recreation of the aftermath of the historical incident of Union Carbide's poisoning of Bhopal. His narrator begins by declaring he is not human, and thereby exposing the horrendous logic of global corporatism that only recognizes the powerful and the privileged as capable of bearing signs of humanity – including practices such as rights and justice. Animal's journey towards a sense of collectivity and solidarity defies this logic and the material forces that sustain it, and his final promise of the future force of such a gathering is a warning to those who wish to continue to deny personhood to other humans and non-humans around them. The blasted and ravaged grounds of Khaufpur/Bhopal provide an ideal environment for this story which perfectly embodies the toxic logical outcome of the contemporary mantra of globalization and development. The disenfranchised beings bear the cost of the poisoning of the air and soil of the city, while the elites spout neo-Malthusian theories about the inevitability (and desirability) of their demise from a safe distance. But the novel holds out the possibility of the defeat of the forces of the few by those of the many, who struggle without hope, but with love. Love here is understood as the realization of the simultaneous singularity, plurality and unity of beings. Music provides a model of the cultural expression of this, and is coded into the theme, form and style of the novel. Finally, it is the novel's representation of the lethal environment of unevenness and reflections on how to imagine an insurrection against it that are amongst its most notable achievements.

7

'Blood on my Water': Ruchir Joshi

In our consideration of the contemporary Indian novel in English, we have thus far based our readings on two basic propositions: that the material environment of unevenly developed postcolonial India forms a necessary horizon for these artistic registers; and that these realities find themselves embedded in both the form and content of the novels. If uneven historical development (shaped by colonialism and neo- or postcolonialism) is registered in the novel's formal traffic with the various 'archaic' and local cultural expressions that surround it, the incessant presence of the relationship between land, air, water and the various non-humans and humans who inhabit these spaces as thematic underpinning confirms the importance of environment to the core of that body of writing that is most easily identified with the global boom in South Asian literature.

But in this final chapter, I want to complicate this line of argument – in part to test its limits and in part to see whether it is necessary to refine or expand our understanding of the cultures of uneven environments. I want to ask whether historical development not only compels or permits the fusion of strictly 'archaic' and contemporary cultural forms, but also whether it enables, in addition, a peculiarly pitched relationship between forms that are nearly contemporaneous? We have looked at the Indian English-language novel form's traffic with folk-theatre, classical music and dance. But how do we think about its relationship with forms such as photography or cinema, which, in modern Indian history, evolved more or less over the same historical expanse as the novel, even the novel in English? While at the thematic level, there seem to be no grounds for questioning the crucial relevance of environment, do we need to adjust our understanding of the relationship between the various cultural forms of this environment?

I turn to Ruchir Joshi's *The Last Jet-Engine Laugh* (first published in 2001) in an attempt to answer these questions. But first, I want to establish the historical charge of the specific element that flows through Joshi's narrative – water.

Water wars

At the beginning of Joshi's 2002 novel, dubbed by its publisher Flamingo as the 'essential literary debut of the year', the narrator Paresh Bhatt, a retired photographer, offers a short incantation to his deity:

> The water's decent today … Most days it's a pheeka brown … which basically means 'take your chances', but today it's a full green. Which means it's managed to handle all the junk in the supply. I think I will do something simple, almost a prayer, almost perfect.
>
> (Joshi 2002, pp. 3–4)

Paresh's almost perfect prayer turns out to be making a cup of espresso on his old Italian coffee machine with the uncontaminated water, thereby establishing the signature tone of the novel – bleakly comic and brutally tender. But it also draws our attention to the thematic importance of water – that basic condition of planetary life – to Joshi's exploration of the conflict and violence that engulf the past, present and future of the novel's world. This is an astute move, because the politics of water conditions much of the lived experience of contemporary India, south Asia, and indeed, the whole world today. I want to sketch out the evidence for this claim about the element that animates Joshi's art.

The outpouring of policy papers, economic reports, journalism, scientific literature and academic publications across a number of disciplines over the past decade on the topic of water is one of the signs of the belated recognition of an unfolding global crisis of existential proportions. As Kevin Watkins and his team of researchers put it in their landmark United Nations report in 2006: 'At the start of the 21st century the violation of human right to clean water is destroying human potential on an epic scale … Exclusion from clean water and basic sanitation destroys more lives than any war or terrorist act' (Watkins 2006, p. 27). If we put aside Watkins's narrowly anthropocentric focus for the moment, we shall see his diagnosis confirmed and amplified in virtually every publication on the topic. By virtue of its basic importance

to planetary life, a global crisis in water percolates through every level of human and non-human existence. It raises fundamental questions about social, political and economic organizations and dispensations, and asks us to re-examine the entire web of our collective relationships. The limits, failures and lost opportunities at every level of global, national, regional and local existence are clearly and unmistakably exposed.

For example, for the authors of the United Nations report, there is no doubt that the water crisis is simultaneously a product and productive of the larger crises of the current global economic and political dispensation: 'It also reinforces the obscene inequalities in life chances that divide rich and poor nations in an increasingly prosperous and interconnected world and that divide people within countries on the basis of wealth, gender and other markers for disadvantage' (p. 1). The report compiles a wealth of evidence and analysis to show that the crisis is not caused by the lack of availability of water, but by the politically and economically structured uneven distribution of it. Two in three humans without access to clean water live on less than two dollars a day. In Mumbai, India, the rich suburbs are able to use fifteen times more water per head than the inner city slums (p. 7). That the crisis of water exposes the structural poverty associated with uneven development is not just the conclusion of United Nations technocrats. Marq de Villiers, a hard-nosed South African journalist, finds a startling contrast between the 90 per cent of Africans who have to dig or walk fantastic distances for their water and the family of walnut growers in California's central valley whose chief concern was the proper watering of the lush lawns of their local golf club (de Villiers 2001, pp. 13–14). And a policy brief issued by the influential Stockholm-based Water Research Institute notes that the costs of the crisis 'are disproportionately borne by the poor and by the environment' (Stalgren 2006, p. 3).

The global water crisis also illustrates deep-seated inequalities in gender relations, especially in the agricultural heartlands of the postcolonial world. The UN report notes that:

> Women are doubly disadvantaged in the irrigation systems. Lacking formal rights to land in many countries, they are excluded from the irrigation system management. At the same time, informal inequalities – including the household division of labour … militate against women having a real voice in decision-making.
>
> (Watkins 2006, p. 18)

It goes on to show how the sheer time spent in collecting water 'disempowers women and lowers income' by citing research complied by Indian organizations that studied the cases of women working in a micro-enterprise project who lost up to $100 a year because of the four hours that they spent collecting water per day (pp. 47–8).

Additionally, the crisis raises disturbing questions about governance and the political systems that prevail in our world. The Stockholm Water Institute's research baldly states that that the lack of access to clean water is down to a 'governance crisis in the water sector' fuelled by corruption. The authors of this paper at times appear to be wearily Euro-centric in their assumptions about corruption and lack of accountability in that they seem to associate these ravages almost entirely with the postcolonial world. Although they begin by carefully stating that 'no one is immune to corruption. Poor marginalised women, well-educated scientific experts and well-meaning international aid workers can all be part of the problem', their data is almost always gleaned from countries such as India, Brazil and those in sub-Saharan Africa (2006, p. 4). Nonetheless, the picture is telling. In India, the authors found that 41 per cent of customers more than once used bribes to falsify water meter readings, 30 per cent admitted to having paid bribes for repair work on their water delivery system, and 33 per cent claimed it was quite common for government officials and contractors to accept bribes to ensure delivery of water. This endemic corruption actively works to further exclude the poor from access to water because they either cannot afford the bribes or have to pay a much higher amount relative to income, or simply lack the contacts necessary to influence the public officials. The United Nations report largely concurs with this conclusion about governance, but adds a further interesting historical gloss. Noting that clean water and its attendant benefits to health and wealth are (despite appearances) a relatively recent introduction to the rich European and north American countries, the report takes the case of nineteenth-century Britain to illustrate the relationship between political will, governance and environmental health. The authors found that the great sanitation reforms carried out in imperial Britain came in two waves separated by a good few decades. The first wave of reforms was carried out at the behest of industrialists who wanted fresh water for their factories and workforces. But they would not pay taxes for universal provision of water and sanitation, and the ruling classes were anyway more anxious to insulate themselves from the unsanitary poor than to make socially beneficial provisions. Thus, these measures to improve water and sanitation had strictly limited effects and quickly

petered out. It was not until the political landscape changed with the electoral reforms that extended voting rights beyond propertied classes that something like universal reforms were attempted, decades later, in a second great wave. Water scarcity and stress on water provision has a direct relationship with issues of political enfranchisement and governance – this is the lesson of the history of British, and most other Euro-north American metropolises.

Of course, a crisis of water easily translates into a crisis in the availability of food, since intensive irrigation has been the watchword of the agricultural sector in late modernity. It is an astonishing fact that more than half of the 230 million hectares of land currently being irrigated worldwide were added between 1950 and 1980. Not only are we running out of land to irrigate, we are also learning that intensively irrigated land soon gets exhausted and stops producing food because of poor drainage and soil degradation (de Villiers 2001, pp. 166–7 and 171). Since 1984, per capita world annual grain production has fallen by 1 per cent a year in step with the fall in per capita area of irrigated land (Ohlsson 1995, p. 8). And since the world's most populous state, China, is suffering from an acute water crisis that is inexorably driving it towards becoming an importer rather than an exporter of grain we are facing the prospect of a global breakdown in the food supply chain. De Villiers warns that if China's spike in demand for food comes, as seems likely, at around the time when the vast Ogallala aquifer that provides the irrigation for the US 'bread basket' dries out (because of decades of thoughtless intensive pumping), then no one, 'not Argentina, Canada, or Australia – would be able to produce enough to make up the shortfall' (2001, p. 188).

Given this intertwining of water with the central social, political and economic issues of our times, it is not surprising that it also plays a definitive role in the current order of global conflicts. These conflicts range from full-scale wars between states, to 'local' rebellions and most things in between. De Villiers remarks a few notable international cases:

> Wars, or threats of wars, have been made in several riparian systems. The water resources of the Golan Heights and Gaza have figured largely in the military minds of Israel and its neighbours … the Indus, in particular, has poisoned relations between India and Pakistan; India and Bangladesh have squabbled for decades over the Ganges … Iraq, Syria, and Turkey have each mobilized troops in defence [of] rights on the Euphrates and the Tigris.
>
> (2001, pp. 20–1)

He could have included several conflicts in the former Soviet central Asian republics, such as Kirghizstan, Uzbekistan and Turkmenistan, which have all seen 'low-intensity' conflicts in the recent years. This centring of water as a driving force in such high-profile international armed conflicts should make us all pause and reconsider our standard interpretative framework for such events, which usually includes economic, political and social factors but not environmental ones. We should instead accept the notion that there is no way to separate the environmental from these other categories and base our future analyses on this.[1]

It is no accident that South Asia in general, and India in particular, has figured prominently in the literature on both water crises and water conflicts. Drained by major river systems like the Indus and Ganges, the Bramhaputra and the Cauvery, the inhabitants of the territories bristling with colonial and postcolonial borders are inevitably, and tragically, drawn into bitter conflicts. And these conflicts lay bare the specific position occupied by the region in the contemporary economic, social and political global dispensations.

The state of the water in any society is a reliable indicator of the state of that society, and the state of Indian rivers presents an irrefutable argument about contemporary India. And as Anil Agarwal and his colleagues who compiled the influential fifth *Citizen's Report on the State of Indian Environment* (first published in 1999) declared – 'Dirty rivers are simply a gauge for dirty human beings. And by that standard, the Indian society is one of the filthiest in the world' (Agarwal et al. 2002, p. 58). Indian rivers, the primary source of water in the subcontinent, are dying or are dead and, without rapid change in their management, will not be able to support the inhabitants of the region for much longer. The catalogue of failures is devastating. The Yamuna is officially a dead river as it flows past Delhi, choked with raw untreated sewage and industrial waste. The city, which covers 2 per cent of the length of the river basin, contributes up to 71 per cent of the waste discharged into its waters annually (Agarwal et al. 2002, pp. 62–3). The Damodar river, flowing through Bengal and Bihar in the east of the country, receives minerals, mine rejects and toxic effluents to the extent of 6000 million litres per day. On 2 April 1990, 200,000 litres of furnace oil spilled into the river from a steel plant in Bokaro, the slick travelling up to 150 kilometres and affecting 5 million people. It was four days before the authorities took any preventative measures (Agarwal et al. 2002, p. 77). Even the much venerated and celebrated Ganges is so choked with industrial pollution, domestic waste and carcasses that a decades

old, multi-million dollar 'action plan' has not come close to achieving its target of cleansing its water.

But unchecked pollution by industries or households, driven by the logic of achieving unfettered economic growth and consumption, is only one part of the story. The issue of governance is another. Even a recent World Bank report (Briscoe 2006), while unequivocally supportive of the contemporary global economic dispensation, began by noting that India's water and sanitation sector has 'no identity, is bankrupt, is not developing human resources, and focuses primarily on adding infrastructure, not improving services' (p. 30). Noting that excessive and wasteful irrigation has placed 15 per cent of India's aquifers in a critical condition (a figure that is projected to climb to a frightening 60 per cent within the next couple of decades), the report squarely places the blame on political failures, but, predictably enough, omits the issue of the economic policies that lead to such failures, policies largely recommended and enforced by the World Bank itself. Populist posturing, inertia, corruption or simple incompetence is found at every political level. The national Minister of Water Resources is quoted as saying his designation should more appropriately be the 'Minister of Water Conflicts' (p. 35). Senior non-governmental sources declare that the government 'just watches, waits for God to bring rain and temporary relief, or scurries about for a new appeasement package' (p. 38). The report typically suggests a neo-liberal solution – a slimming down of a bloated workforce and a cutting back on salary costs, but its alarm at the state of things in India shows how severe the crisis is at every level.

Unsurprisingly, this condition contributes to the establishment of a permanent conflict that becomes the very signature of living in India. This registers from the base level of a damaged and embattled sense of self: the United Nations authors record the pathos of the words of a low-caste Indian woman – 'We feel so dirty and unclean in summer. We do not wash our clothes for weeks. People say these Dalits are dirty and they smell. But how can we be clean without water?' (Watkins 2006, p. 48). The authors gloss this by suggesting that these words capture the poorly understood relationship between human dignity and water. This sense of degradation and conflict then spreads to engulf local communities, regions and, indeed, the nation. Elisabeth Corell and Ashok Swain detect three levels of water-based conflict in India – 'State versus State; State versus Groups; and Groups versus Groups' (Corell and Swain 1995, pp. 126–7). According to this typology, India has been locked in 'State versus State' types of conflict practically since independence, predominantly with its new postcolonial neighbours, first Pakistan,

and later, Bangladesh. India's unilateral building of a barrage system on the Ganges near Farakka on the then east Pakistan border in 1962, for example, can be seen as one of the important causes of the two wars fought between the states in 1965 and 1971 (Corell and Swain 1995, pp. 126–7). Likewise, at the level of a 'group versus state' conflict, it was the squabble over the water of the Indus river between the states of Punjab and Haryana that lay at the root of what turned out to be one of the bloodiest civil wars in the subcontinent, the growth of a religious fundamentalist and separatist Sikh movement in Punjab (fostered by the National Congress Party-led central government), and ultimately, the assassination of a prime minister, Indira Gandhi (ibid., p. 138). Finally, the region also furnishes a number of examples of deadly 'group versus group' conflicts over water, such as the one over the waters of the Cauvery river in the south, which has been fought over by the inhabitants of Tamil Nadu and Karnataka and the origins of which lie in the politics of colonial patronage and British imperial economic and political preference for Tamil Nadu over Karnataka (then Mysore) (p. 142). So, it is no exaggeration to say that water lies near the heart of the existential crises and conflicts that permeate lives at the local, regional and national levels in contemporary India.

'RHEAL water'

Joshi's novel makes impeccable use of water's historical ability to reveal the deep fissures scoring contemporary India and the globalized world. It is a central thematic element in Joshi's tracing of the myriad connections between local, regional, national and international levels of contemporary existence, which presents a compelling portrait of India-in-the-world and, at the same time, of the world-in-India. The reading I attempt below will differ in some significant ways from that of Anna Guttman, who is one of the few literary critics to have devoted serious attention to this novel. But she is surely right to point out that 'Both the conflict and the political alignments of those engaged in it seem so utterly realistic in the context of the current environmental crises and the realities of the war on terror that the novel would seem to evoke the common belief … that "world politics is already a science fiction dystopia"' (Guttman 2007, p. 146). And water, I have suggested, is central to this artistic effort.

Joshi's novel tracks the major characters – the narrator Paresh Bhatt, his daughter Para, his parents Mahadev and Suman, his friends, former wife Anna, and lovers – over three major segments of time. One of

these is the period just before and around the struggle for Indian independence, the 1930s and 1940s, where we are told how Mahadev and Suman meet while engaged in 'direct action' against the colonial regime and of their subsequent romance. The second period, more diffuse, ranges from the 1970s to 2010, and tells us of Paresh's childhood and youth in Calcutta, his nascent and then successful career as a photographer of international reputation, his meeting with the German photographer and artist Anna, and the birth and childhood of their daughter Para. This personal story is always interwoven with that of the many historical scars raked across India throughout this period – wars with Pakistan, astonishing degrees of state repression, militant separatist movements, millions condemned to unending poverty, the fight for collective survival. The final segment occupies the 'near future' – 2010 to 2030. Para is now an ace fighter pilot and a veteran of pre-emptive air assaults on Pakistan. Her new mission is to command India's most important space station. Paresh is living out his last days in Calcutta with a young lover. This chronological segment is primarily structured by struggles for water, land, habitation and all other kinds of resources, and bears a striking resemblance to the present of the readers in the first decade of the twenty-first century.

Through each of these temporal segments, the flow of water reveals key aspects of the historical and material realities of India, south Asia and the world. In 2030, Paresh horrifies his lover Sonali by offering her a whole glass of uncontaminated water, which, in a society that lives on water-tablets, is a gesture of unforgivable extravagance. As Paresh explains, while Europe still has water and in the USA some states allow their citizens to drink water at their own responsibility, Indian water is either irreversibly polluted or owned by Japanese companies who monopolize and sell it in the form of expensive tablets (thereby dooming most of the Indians, who cannot afford these, to chronic ill-health and a brutal struggle for survival) (Joshi 2002, p. 249).

The true brutality of that struggle is revealed in Paresh's memory of a night in Delhi when he finds himself on the frontlines of this water war. Driving home after an exhibition of his own photographs, Paresh and two of his colleagues see the surreal sight of stray dogs attacking a truck carrying water – 'all trying to get to the big tap that sticks out at the back. One of the larger dogs, a big whitish one, manages to hang on to the tanker for a few moments … its jaws pumping violently on the tap' (p. 257). Soon, the logic of this nightmarish vision is revealed at the level of the human. The water trucks are carrying their premium-rate, precious commodity, to the rich gated communities or 'colonies' of

Delhi, and their trail marks the conflicts generated between the armies of the haves and the have-nots locked into a system of eco-apartheid. Mobs of slum-dwellers try to intercept the truck. Paresh and his friends, driving on its tail, are stopped by vigilante gangs of the 'colony' elites who want to check whether they are infiltrators trying to steal their quota of water. Joshi's 'colony gangs', clad in their US college jackets with Hindu fascist slogans and with global names, like Jimmy, are accurately drawn and telling exposures of the sheer brute force with which the Indian ruling classes of today cling on to power. A short while after they frisk Paresh and his friends for identity (and tell them, *à la* George W. Bush, 'Either you are with your Colony or you should get the fuck out'), they stop the driver of one of the water trucks for failing to deliver – 'What will my children drink tomorrow, you fucking pimp? What do we pay your owner so much for?' They decide to kill him to set an example – 'Otherwise this will go on and on. These bhenchods have to understand that we are not joking' (pp. 278–9). Paresh and his friends step in, and in the violent struggle that follows, they sustain injury, and one of the 'colony' vigilantes is killed – the *coup de grace* delivered by the truck driver, before he melts back into the shadows where millions of his fellow beings throng, impoverished and doomed.

Water, with the attendant connotations of sanitation (it is no accident that sizeable chunks of Paresh's memoirs are related to scatological matters) and the various struggles that these generate, are markers of a dystopic present and future. But the contradictions of the past, most closely associated with Paresh's parents Mahadev and Suman, are also revealed through the ebbs and flows of water. Unlike the contemporary India that is so devastatingly penetrated by global capital, Joshi's imagined India of the 1930s and 1940s still holds out dreams of collective emancipation. Hence, water there bears promises of release as well as cautionary tales of contamination and reversals. Mahadev and Suman first meet on the dry bed of the Sabarmati river near the town of Ahmedabad in Gujrat. The lack of water here, however, is not allowed to become a sign of ruination and failure. The river is flooded by human beings instead:

> someone standing on the bridge could see the amazing sight of a wide, dry river bed change colour from sand to white. He would be transfixed by the sight of something even more frightening than a river in full spate – the spectacle of thousands of people moving together, each dreaming of a country, and each imagining that every other person around them was dreaming exactly the same dream.
>
> (p. 37)

It is this flood that will eventually sweep away the colonial regime, as well as bringing Mahadev and Suman together. Yet, the signs of contamination are already there. When Mahadev arrives in Calcutta for the first time, it is raining and the river water, seeping through the already creaking sewage system, has flooded the city and the rail station. Mahadev, a devout Brahmin, interprets this as an auspicious sign – the holy river Ganges's personal welcome to a young man's first venture into an unknown metropolis. But he fails to notice that dead and rotting fish swirl around him as he stands knee-deep in the foetid water, and as he stands engrossed in saluting the river, a pickpocket takes the opportunity to relieve him of all his money. The unclean water draws our eyes to the human corruption that marks even this idealistic period of liberation struggle. Years later, recalling the heady days, Mahadev chokes with anger at the thought of the adulterated 'cheap watery tea' sold to the freedom fighters by an enterprising Indian factory owner: 'Just think, that one of the great industrial empires of post-independence India was built on selling bad tea to people about to go to jail' (p. 32).

One of the most interesting thematic moves made by Joshi in his novel is to weave into the story of India's nationhood the imagined afterlife of the iconic Indian nationalist leader, Subhash Chandra Bose, who disappeared during the Second World War while directing armed operations alongside the Japanese army against the British-Indian forces in south-east Asia. Bose is often read as the suppressed (or repressed) story of India's freedom struggle. Where Nehru and Gandhi advocated non-violent civil 'direct action', Bose raised an army with the help of the Axis powers and attempted to invade India. And where Nehru and Gandhi were committed to a secular and religiously tolerant new nation, Bose was committed to a militant Hindu supremacist vision of India. Anna Guttman goes as far as to suggest that Joshi's novel is 'an allegory of Bose's centrality to the Indian nation … If Indian history is violent, chaotic, and unknowable … this is because it has been so at its core at least since the nationalist period' (Guttman 2007, p. 140). And if Bose's violent methods foreshadow the acceptance of violence and militarism as normative by Mahadev and Suman's grandchild – Paresh's daughter Para – the costs of such practices are foretold in the waters that alternately freeze and lap around his imagined afterlife. In Joshi's novel, Bose survives an attack on his aircraft by his own Japanese fighter escorts (he has become a demanding liability to the Japanese war effort), crash-lands in Soviet territory and spends the rest of his life in a Siberian prison as a political prisoner. The water in the gulag in which he is dying has assumed a lethal, frozen form in temperatures that

hover around minus sixty degrees centigrade. His own damaged kidneys cannot process the flow of his bodily fluids, thereby presenting him as a case of historical blockage – an irritating and painful reminder of routes not taken that must be flushed away or sanitized. To this dying man comes Kalidas Dutta – Mahadev and Suman's Bengali friend – arrested for smuggling cigarettes into the Soviet Union, and taken to Bose to act as a translator. Kalidas tells this story to a fascinated Paresh many years later, and his record of Bose's final delusional rants is unsurprisingly couched in the language of water.

The water images that Joshi employs in connection to the Bose story capture both the (thwarted) hopes and catastrophic consequences of a certain kind of nationalist imagination. Kalidas hears Bose say in his delirium: 'Notun system banaTEI hobey. Gentlemen, this city WILL HAVE a new sewage system. And as Mayor it is my DUTY to ensure that no political and commercial interests come in the way of sanitation that the people of Calcutta require' (Joshi 2002, p. 121). This dream of purity, uncontaminated water and social and environmental well-being recalls Bose's early mayoral career in Calcutta. Immediately after these utterances, Joshi's narrative breaks off to give us a potted history 'from below' of the sewage and sanitation system of imperial Calcutta, describing how the spatial logic of the city closely followed the tapping and allocation of water. The water distribution and sewage system privileged the central 'white' parts of the city inhabited by the colonial rulers and some Indian elites. It was on the promise of ensuring the availability of water and sanitation for all of Calcutta that Bose first made his running as a political leader.

Bose's demented musings, delivered nearly two decades after India's independence and in the context of abiding conditions of abject poverty (and his own marginalization as a historical actor), are a testament to both the pathos and the power of the dreams of a pure and strong nation. Yet, the flipside of this dream – its structural relationship with a violent will to power – also forms a part of Bose's last testaments. He has vivid recollections of the epic journey on German and Japanese submarines that took him from refuge in Nazi Austria and Germany to imperial Japan and war on British India. One episode of this journey is retold to Kalidas with special vividness and significance. Here, the respective commanders of the German and Japanese submarines that have arrived to exchange their still-respected Indian ally decide to give him and themselves the treat of fresh fish for dinner. In a characteristically violent manner that exposes the logic of Bose's chosen political path, they order the machine-gunning of two schools of dolphins that

have been playing near their vessels. Decades later, Bose's account of this scene reveals not merely his associative guilt for this slaughter of the dolphin families, but a belated recognition of the baleful consequences of the militant pursuit of a purified nation:

> *Three of them, then down, out and then up and one is hit, the curve broken, cleaved in half … the ones coming behind, at first not understanding what was happening, then an adult knocking two babies down out of sight before catching bullets, flipping half alive …* 'Blood on my water. Innocent blood on my sea'.
>
> (p. 134; italics in original)

The water, bloodied by the whimsical slaughter, foretells the violence that will sustain postcolonial India. Somewhere at the core of the struggle for independence, Joshi detects the contamination that will infect the body of the independent nation.

Water sustains Joshi's depiction of the key conflicts that mark the personal and political histories of Paresh, Para and independent India. The various political insurgencies and wars of the country are entwined with hydraulic symbols, images and metaphors. Paresh recalls his awe as a child at being allowed to play with the handgun of a visiting policeman, who regales the family with stories of hunting down and killing the Naxalite insurgents in the Calcutta of the 1970s. The policeman's story brings the trauma and glamour of violence and death to young Paresh, and after he leaves, the child peers into the night with 'rain lashing down … In the throw of the bulb I could see sheets of water breaking on the mess of wires, making them shake' (p. 302). In a flash of lightning he sees, or imagines he sees 'a shadow in a shadow' perched on top of an electricity pole outside his window. The spectral yet pervasive presence of the insurgent, both concealed and revealed by water, precisely correlates to the spectral and pervasive presence of violence in the everyday life of independent India. When the iconic Howrah bridge of Calcutta is bombed in the 2007 of the novel, a digital camera captures the last moments of the bridge's water burial in a series of images that are later treasured by Paresh – 'The last picture is deep in the water … and it is amazing – a close-up of a slightly blurred fish tail with the geometric patterns of girders out of focus in the background. It looks as if the fish has just knocked down the bridge' (p. 34).

This weaving together of water and violence extends to the 'third' generational (Para's) conflicts that Joshi depicts as being the norm for India, south Asia, and the world of the near future. Para's early and

exceptional appetite for war is revealed in the video-game tournament she wins by beating an ace Israeli air force general. The game, where individuals choose their fighter aircrafts and cockpit simulators, connect with each other on cyberspace, and then battle each other in situations of their choosing, foretells Para's career as an elite fighter pilot. In the deciding game of a best-of-three final, she picks an obsolete helicopter with less firepower against her enemy's state of the art machine, but chooses heavy monsoons and the cityscape of Bombay as her battle-ground. Her knowledge of terrain and her harnessing of the drenched environment, helps her defeat her much more experienced opponent. This war in water frequently spills over from the 'virtual' to the 'real' life of the future. When Para leads her squadron into Pakistan for a pre-emptive strike which causes significant civilian and military damage, it is through an artificial storm and rain created by Pakistan's allies, the USA, with their 'HAARP weather interference system'. We have already seen some of the brutal internal water wars that Paresh finds in the near futures of Delhi and Calcutta. And what happens at the level of the historical and collective is also embedded in the individual body. Scarcity, contamination, aridity, flooding and artificial liquidity appears in the failing body of Paresh, whose kidneys (like Bose's) have shut down – a breakage in the biological water-treatment system that mirrors the decay of the civic structures outside: 'The commode-circuitry on strike and inside me a liquid tailback going all the way up to my navel, a roadblock in the front. Wanting to let go very badly but nothing coming out and the rain outside turning the screw' (p. 49). The historical water wars here have assumed an embodied form, for not only are bodies at war over water, but wars of water have entered those bodies.

'This optic-driven two-leg'

Photographs and descriptions of photography clearly play a crucial role in Joshi's novel. Large sections are devoted to detailed descriptions of photographs and their importance to Paresh's life. Near the very beginning we find Paresh looking at two photographs that stand next to each other in his room – one of himself as a young boy eating ice-cream in Calcutta, and one of his daughter, taken more than two decades later, also eating an ice-cream, but this time in Paris (Joshi 2002, p. 7). As a narrative device, the descriptions of these photographs and many of the others that Paresh offers the readers work to reveal the deep and complex emotional ties between the characters, which in turn frames our understanding of Paresh's interpretation of the history that drives

and is embedded in them. Our early glimpse of these two photographs, for example, reveals the bond between Paresh and Para, but the tonal registers of nostalgia, loss and distance also reveal the very different historical choices that each has made. Yet this early view of the two photographs also sets up some formal, stylistic and structural principles for Joshi's novel. The spatial as well as the temporal span captured in the juxtaposition of the two photographs emerges as a central feature of the novel, where vastly different scales and segments of space and time are fused with each other, often in the same sentence, to offer something different from the normative stately linear progress of a historical or a science-fiction novel – two genres that have been described as being most relevant to our understanding of Joshi's work. The detailed, almost pointillist, technique of visual description – including colours, angles and points of view – emerges as a key strategy, not to further the progression of the plot and narrative in any banal sense, but to achieve a deeper and richer understanding of what Walter Benjamin would call an aura of a particular historical era.[2] Joshi's repeated use of this technique – breaking off from narrating the story in order to plunge into descriptions of various photographs – operates as a meta-narratorial move in the same way as dance, music or folk-theatre do in the novels of Arundhati Roy, Amitav Ghosh and Indra Sinha. It is at the same time a way of exploring the inner lives of the characters that lie beyond their powers of narration, and a way of meditating on the possibilities and limits of the form that brings their narrative to us. I shall turn to some of the consequences of this technique in some details in a moment. But first, I want to look at some of the critical responses to this technique and to explore the significance of Joshi's photo-novel to our discussion of the cultural forms of uneven postcolonial environment.

Joshi's novel was released amidst considerable buzz and hyperbole in the publishing world. The reviews, however, turned out to be more mixed. While nearly all of them praised the characterization and the punch carried by the portrait of the dystopic future, many were puzzled by the stylistic and formal elements of the novel. Helen Hayward, writing in the *Times Literary Supplement*, called the novel a series of vignettes sketching out a history of modern India. She went on to note the formal resemblances between photography and the novel: 'Photography is a dominant metaphor in a work which aims to capture some of the "unfinishedness" ascribed to photographic images – a quality of suggestiveness … Objects are brought vividly to life by means of a painstakingly visual scrutiny' (Hayward 2001, p. 21). But this 'unfinishedness', for Hayward, detracts from the novel's overall

quality. The multiple points of view that Joshi employs to capture the life of a nation lead to the novel's succumbing to its own diversity. For Hayward, 'it is difficult to arrive at conclusive formulations of the novel' (ibid.) Similarly, for Zulfikar Abbany, writing in the *Independent,* the first part of the novel is 'wonderfully straightforward, and the dark humour immensely pleasing' (Abbany 2001). But he begins to find the prose jarring and the frequent switching of narrative perspective as 'forcing the readers to perform logical acrobatics'. This essentially visual technique, for Abbany, has no place in narrative prose fiction – 'Changing perspectives is a technique that Joshi will have developed through his work as a documentary film-maker But it doesn't work here' (ibid.) As he goes on to say, this technique is 'out of place', resulting in a mismatch between formal ambition and the 'basics of a story'. This verdict was echoed by Maya Jaggi, writing in the *Guardian*, who found the novel's myriad strands unexamined with 'sufficient tenacity or depth' and scolded Joshi for succumbing to the 'pitfall of trying to include everything, as though any lesser ambition were too conventional, too modest, too small' (Jaggi 2001). Unsurprisingly, as will be evident from my previous assertions, it is precisely this 'out of place' technique and the alleged mismatch between form and content that I find of most interest in Joshi's novel. It is this fusion between the photograph and the novel, the camera's eye and narrative, which makes Joshi's move, to my mind, both successful and telling. Dominique Vitalyos has singled out Joshi's novel as an example of the progressive formal experiments being conducted by contemporary Indian writers where generic codes of the historical novel, the detective novel and science fiction are being exchanged and grafted on to each other (Vitalyos 2007). Yet, much of the success of these literary experiments belongs to the novel's capacity to interact with neighbouring non-literary cultural forms.

Thus far, we have advanced with the assumption that the conditions of radical uneven development and all its material implications (including environmental ones) confer a historic privilege on the Indian novel in English in so far as it is able to borrow from the codes of the diverse cultural forms that surround it – including more 'archaic' forms such as folk-theatre and classical music – and fuse these with the more established Eurocentric norms of the novel form. But Joshi's use of photography provides us with an interesting problem. Photography and the novel (as distinct from prose fiction) seem to be roughly contemporaneous forms, both arriving in India with colonialism in the nineteenth-century.[3] So, which is the 'archaic' form here, and which the contemporary? Is the novel's capacity to absorb elements of its

surrounding cultural forms also a sign of its capacity to present itself as forever contemporary? Do we call those forms 'archaic' that do not display, or that display to a lesser extent, this phoenix-like feature of the novel? Should we rethink the categories of the contemporary and the 'archaic'? I will return to consider these questions later. But first, let us turn briefly to the precise elements of photography that Joshi uses and to the question of what flavour it lends to his novel.

His memories of being a photographer offer Paresh a space in which he is able to reflect on the practices and meaning of image production. His recollections of his favourite shots frequently raise fundamental questions about self-identity and agency: 'What a strange creature this thing, this semi-human with machinery attached to its face. This twentieth-century spawn, this one-eyed monster, this close-elbowed, crouching-bending-stalking spine-curved thing … This optic-driven two leg' (Joshi 2002, p. 56). Paresh's reflections are particularly apt because photography as a cultural form has long provided the opportunity for some searching investigations into the web of relationships between history, culture, individuals, societies, technology, economics and politics. It is no accident, for example, that photographs become the occasion for Paresh's meditation on the fraught relationship between himself and the collective histories and past traditions of his nation and those of his family. For, as Walter Benjamin observed, the advent of photography – with its quantum leap in the reproductive rate and capacity of images – makes problematic precisely the relationship between the past and the present:

> The here and now of the original underlies the concept of authenticity, and on the latter in turn is founded the idea of a tradition which has passed the object down as the same, identical thing to the present day. *The whole sphere of authenticity eludes technological – and of course, not only technological – reproduction*.
>
> (Benjamin 2008, p. 21; emphasis in original)

Thus, in the world of photography, we lose a sense of the embeddedness of history in the past; history is presented to us without its specificity, what Benjamin calls its aura – 'A strange tissue of space and time: the unique apparition of a distance, however near it may be' (ibid.) This loss of a sense of distance or depth, the specificity of things, is in turn related to the contradictory impulses that haunt all creatures of the age of capitalist modernity – the desire to get closer to things and a simultaneous compulsion to flatten out each object's uniqueness and assimilate

it into the world of ever-circulating commodities (ibid., p. 23). Paresh, thus, remains on the threshold of permanent crisis, as his chief means of assessing the past, photographs, simultaneously offer him a sense of lost origins and deny the possibility of his ever being able to reach an understanding of their specificity and particular relationship with his present. This is precisely the problem that modern visual culture bequeaths to us. We can only achieve an understanding of our reality by decoding our pasts as embodied in objects or matter that surround us; but our chief way of seeing objects is mediated through the eye of the camera, which robs the past of its uniqueness and prevents us from seeing its connections to our present. As Scott McQuire explains: 'In transforming the basic means through which we encounter the world, the camera has shifted the grounding of both "the world" and the "we" who might pose the question of this encounter … the camera has induced a crisis at the border between "representation" and "reality"' (1998, p. 1). Yet, what is taken away with one hand by photography is returned as a strange gift with the other. If it robs our sense of the uniqueness of the past, it offers us a way of apprehending our present selves. Speaking of 'another nature that speaks to the camera', Benjamin (2008, p. 37) designates this as the space informed by the human unconscious: 'it is through the camera that we first discover the optical unconscious, just as we discover the instinctual unconscious through psychoanalysis'. The camera shows us what we see, without knowing that we are seeing it, thereby revealing a depth of reality that would otherwise elude our knowledge. This it does through an unprecedented attention to detail – 'material physiognomic aspects, image worlds, which dwell in the smallest things – meaningful yet covert enough to find a hiding place in waking dreams' (ibid., p. 279). This revelatory aspect of the photograph is contained in what Roland Barthes (1993, p. 26) calls the *punctum* – the element of the detail that 'rises from the scene, shoots out of it like an arrow, and pierces me'. For Barthes, the *punctum* breaks the unitary space of habitual depthless viewing that is the normal relationship between the photograph and the human eye. It defamiliarizes reality and recasts it in a startling new light.

It is this virtue of the camera, this slanting of a critical light on the present reality, that Susan Sontag (2002, p. 87) saw as one of its signatures – 'Photographs do not simply render reality – realistically. It is reality which is scrutinized, and evaluated, for its fidelity to photographs.' For Sontag, this makes photography 'a unique system of disclosures … it shows us reality as we had *not* seen it before' (ibid., p. 119). It is this kind of 'intensive seeing' that photography offers – Sontag likens

it to modernist poetry – which makes it the very opposite of the facile mimetic art it is usually taken to be. Sontag declares it to be the perfect vehicle for the 'grandiose, century-old threats of a Surrealist takeover of the modern sensibility' (p. 51).

Yet, the reality revealed by the photograph is not of comfort to anyone yearning for a sense of continuity with either the past or the present. The very physical form of the photograph, as Benjamin has observed, is both a product and productive of modern reification and alienation. Sontag notes that 'The photograph is a thin slice of space as well as time … Anything can be separated, can be made discontinuous, from anything else … Photography reinforces a nominalist view of social reality as consisting of small units of apparently infinite number' (p. 22).

Barthes too, speaks of this effect of the photograph – it is not just objective reality that appears as fragmented and discontinuous, but the very idea of self and subjectivity: 'In front of the lens, I am at the same time: the one I think I am, the one I want others to think I am, the one the photographer thinks I am, and the one he makes use of to exhibit his art' (Barthes 1993, p. 13). This enables us to understand Paresh's compulsion towards using photography to understand himself and his most intimate relationships, as well as the anguish this causes. On the one hand, each photograph he examines and describes to us in detail – that of himself as a young boy with his mother, the one of the bank of stars in the galaxy taken by Para from the space station; the tired, poor Indian woman captured in a protest march by Paresh's lens; another one of his closest friend Viral laughing on a beach in Goa – holds out the possibility of reading the real as revealed through the optical unconscious. On the other hand, they offer up the vision of a montage of discrete realities and fragmented selves that thwart Paresh's passionate enquiry into the nature of belonging.

It is not impossible to derive a sense of connective possibilities from this apparently endlessly fragmented vision of the real. But in order to do so, we have to abandon our normative understanding of historical reality unfolding in sequential and linear fashion. Discussing how the details captured in a photograph always exceed the textual description of it, Scott McQuire (1998, p. 48) says: 'It is not that the photograph is inherently richer in meaning than words, rather that the two orders are in some ways discontinuous. The tradition of linearity which has formed the privileged order of the word … seems incommensurable with the domain of the image.' And Susan Sontag, after talking about the photographic vision of disconnected realities, still holds out the

possibilities of analogical knowledge: 'To view reality as an endless set of situations which mirror each other, to extract analogies from the most dissimilar things, is to anticipate the characteristic form of perception stimulated by photographic images' (Sontag 2002, p. 159). In order to understand the characteristic revelation about the nature of reality that the photograph offers us, we have to be prepared to suspend the preferred linear mode of narrative and to practise analogical, or more accurately, homological readings. It is then that the connections between the apparently disconnected slices of reality can be properly understood.

Non-linear, homological readings that acknowledge the fragmentation of modern reality but that still attempt to trace its myriad hidden connections; this, precisely, is the practice that Joshi, in contrast to his main narrator, Paresh, attempts to encourage in his readers. While full comprehension of the meanings of the series of photographs that Paresh looks at remains always just beyond the reach of his enunciation (although he does intuit large segments of it), Joshi absorbs the properties of the photograph into the body of his novel and turns them into both a symptom and revelation of our contemporary history. How successful is he in this?

'What you imagine is a whole'

Photographs, then, are an important thematic presence in Joshi's novel. But they are also clues that invite us to read the prose, by way of homology, as we would read a series of images. We have seen classical dance, folk-theatre and classical music perform this dual role of thematic trope and meta-narrative device in the three other novels we have looked at. Photography, for Joshi, operates in precisely the same manner as these other cultural forms do for Roy, Ghosh and Sinha.

Perhaps the most sustained stylistic example of this is offered by Joshi's final section, 'Knocking on Heaven's Door', which begins with an epigraph from Rainer Maria Rilke: 'your fast fading photograph / in my more slowly fading hands'. This elegiac evocation of memory, reality and loss sets the tone for the chapter, whose single story-line is concerned with Para's final moments aboard the Indian space station, which has been attacked and damaged by a United States space vessel in the inaugural act of a new war. But this story, and its dramatic action – Para has to destroy the space station as she abandons it to prevent any intelligence falling into American hands – becomes the occasion for a series of montages composed of detailed vignettes with no

cuts offered to effect a spatio-temporal separation. If artificially forced apart, these 'word-pictures' would break down into discrete components: a scene from the early life of the long-dead Indian leader Subhash Chandra Bose, where he triumphs in his civil service examination by outwitting his hostile examiners; a scene of Para writing a farewell letter to Paresh, setting the space station to self-destruct mode, euthanizing her dying colleagues, and launching herself into space in a fragile escape vehicle without any guarantees of survival; Mahadev and Suman cycling together after one of their trysts in the Gujrat of the 1930s, which then turns out to be an episode imagined by Para and programmed into a computer game by her when she was a young girl; a scene from Mahadev's death-bed in a Calcutta about to plunge into communal violence as the dying man is attended to by Paresh, his wife Anna, and the infant Para; Paresh and the child Para on a holiday in France where Para nearly falls from a cliff before Paresh snatches her back; and a final scene of Paresh and Para driving in France when Paresh is almost shot by the French police on suspicion of being an Islamist terrorist.

These six 'pictures' span generations and occupy vastly different spaces and histories. Their time is from the 1930s to an imagined 2030s, their geography from India to France to a space station; historical figures rub shoulders with fictional characters over three generations, from grandparents to grandchild, and the lives of individuals are set alongside the lives of nations. Yet, grammatically and syntactically there is often nothing to separate them. The first scene – of Subhash Chandra Bose's examination triumph – is narrated in the present tense and ends with Bose's realization that he has outwitted the British examiner who was determined to fail him: 'Something pushes down on his shoulders, relaxes them. The moment the man neglects the "Mr" before Bose, Subhash knows he is through. Fortune favours the brave' (Joshi 2002, p. 340). The very next line begins 'The Ice-Cream Cart. It's her only chance', and we are catapulted more than a hundred years into the future, from early twentieth-century Calcutta to mid-twenty-first-century space station. This scene of Para's final moments on the space station ends with her cocooned in the escape shuttle, not knowing whether she will survive, trying to calm herself by listening to music on her handset radio: 'The slow, cracked, dance of an old throat. The stomach throbbing up through the lungs to trap a single note in the lull of breath' (p. 353). And without a pause, this segues into the 'present' of Mahadev and Suman cycling across the hot and dusty countryside of Gujrat – 'Her knees up and down, up and down.'

This style is perhaps more sustained in the novel's final section, but remains a feature of the work as a whole. The effect is echoed in the series of pictures of the collapsing Howrah bridge that Paresh flicks through – as one would a kinetic book – and which produces as a result the representation of the entire significance of the event. The reader may, as Zulfikar Abbany complains, have to perform logistic acrobatics in order to follow the line of the story, but if s/he succeeds in resisting the lure of linear narrative, s/he is rewarded with an image that captures the Benjaminian aura of the moment of Joshi's artwork – his attempt to show all the strands, acknowledged, suppressed or hidden, that go into the making of the life and times of the postcolonial nation and its children. This is something like Para's view of the earth from space, and the totality of the understanding this inspires: '*remember when you said the only time you can take pleasure in a nation is when you are away from it? When you can see what you imagine is a whole? Well I now understand what you meant*' (p. 342; emphasis in original). And this also means that while someone like Anna Guttman is right to see this novel as a narrative of the nation, offering a space wherein the nation's many diversities are negotiated and imagined, I think that she is wrong to see in Joshi's work a total refusal of logic – whether mathematical or magical – and even of the dialectic that makes it possible to distinguish sense from nonsense. On the contrary, I would suggest that the vision of the radically diverse and differentiated but single nation that we can see (along with Para) emerging from Joshi's novel is built both on a strict logic and dialectic. But the logic is that of non-linearity, and the dialectic that between the image and the prose narrative. And these offer us a vision of the imagined nation of India as a whole.

Joshi, then, presents us with a novel that absorbs, and to some extent, aspires to the specific representative quality of photographs and photography. Contrary to Abbany's claim, I would say that the particular sense of 'out of place' that this brings to the narrative is both the product of and productive of the specific historical conditions of colonial and postcolonial India. But, as I indicated in the beginning, this provokes some interesting questions about the theoretical basis of the readings that I have offered so far. In the previous chapters, we followed Trotsky's theoretical insights about the cultural forms of uneven development to read the novels of Roy, Ghosh and Sinha. Thus, we saw how the novel – a contemporary form – absorbs and is fused with elements of the 'archaic' forms that thrive around it (and whose existence in turn corresponds to the different social and economic formations thrown together by historical capitalism as it develops unevenly over space

and time). However, this clearly cannot fully describe the relationship between the novel and photography. If, as Priya Joshi has suggested, the 'novel came to India more than two hundred years ago in the massive steamer trunks that accompanied the British there', the photographic camera followed soon after (2003, p. 79). This is hardly the fusion of the contemporary and the 'archaic', since both the novel and photography are children of British colonialism in India. Does this variation enable us to come up with anything less banal than the reflexive answer that the fusion of the novel and other contemporary forms that surround it has been a signature move since early European modernism, and that any such move on the part of the postcolonial Indian novel is merely a continuation of that tradition?

There is a scene in Joshi's novel in which some ways of thinking through this issue might be embedded and I want to close this chapter by looking at it. Here, the year is 1932, and Mahadev is accompanying his sister to a photographer's studio to have her pre-nuptial portrait taken. Mahadev is utterly mesmerized by the camera, the pictures and the other studio staples, and the photographer is pleased:

> 'Yes yes, photography, interest in photography, very good, it's a very new thing but soon it will rule the world. Good boy. You can watch.'
>
> This was 1932 and photography was more than a hundred years old but Mahadev was fascinated.
>
> (Joshi 2002, p. 79)

The contrast between the photographer and the narrator's points of view on photography here points us to what we might call the colonial (and postcolonial) time-slip. To the photographer, his trade carries the glamour and the prestige attached to the civilizing claims of the colonizing power. It speaks of technology and modernity and holds the promise of admission to the citizenship of a globalized world. From the perspective of the narrator at the other spatio-temporal end of the same globalized world, however, photography as a cultural form has long been overtaken by the slew of new forces such as the cinema and the radio. The photographer's studio itself perfectly captures the coexisting but unsynchronized trajectories of modernity. On the one hand, there are the shiny accoutrements of modernity – a desk, a chair, and a new fan 'circling in wonder as if it had just discovered electricity' (ibid.) On the other hand, rows of images of Hindu gods and goddesses sit bathed in the electric light and cooled by the fan. Punctuating these images

of traditional religiosity are the secular portraits of individuals and families, completing the juxtaposition of the archaic and the modern, the religious and the secular.

In addition to this representation of what, after Johannes Fabian, we can call coeval modernity, the details of Joshi's portrait places cultural forms as a process in this continuously unfolding coevality.[4] Joshi does not allow the delusion of a-historicism to settle on photography. It, too, unfolds differentially over time. It is already over a century old, as the narrator reminds us. But it also has the aura of the new because of the differential rate of the trajectories of modernity as expressed through colonialism and empire. Mahadev can see 'archaic' lithographs mixed up amongst the modern black-and-white portraits. This sense of a cultural form's evolution over time jogs Joshi's readers repeatedly – over the course of the book we see a veritable panorama of the history of image production where Mahadev's 'hobby' photography is placed next to Paresh's more professional, increasingly technologically complex, and finally, digital photography. These images, in turn, are placed next to the cyber-age image-making capacity of Para's gaming sub-culture and then to the space-age visual technology employed by her Indian space station. Photography itself emerges as a cultural field with an evolving and dynamic history, where the logic of capitalism registers at its various residual or archaic and dominant or contemporary levels.

Where does this leave us with our question about the relationship between the novel and photography? I think this might be an invitation to extend our thinking about the novel's own unfolding as a cultural form within the historical environment of capitalist and colonial uneven development. If we continue to read Joshi's imagined 'small history' of photography both as a theme and then homologically, as a meta-narrative device, then we are drawn towards making some observations about the form of the novel itself. First, the contemporaneous nature of the novel and photography in India prevents us from mechanically labelling one as 'archaic' and the other as modern. Rather, we are invited to think about these categories in a historicized and dynamic fashion in which each form is shown to be unfolding differentially over time and space, with their own 'archaic' and contemporary stages. Second, if we accept that the meshing of images and texts in Joshi's novel is a kind of 'light writing' itself, this draws our attention to the novel's own historical unfolding as a differentiated cultural form. The novel's tendency to reinvent and regenerate itself as soon as it appears to hit a level of formal exhaustion has been noted at least since the theorizations of the Russian formalists and Bakhtin. In

this, it bears an uncanny similarity to historical capitalism itself. At the centre of this capacity lies the form's ability to absorb and enmesh its surrounding cultural forms both as themes and as formal resources. Its narrative space enables the novel to talk about painting, dance, music, theatre, cinema, opera, and pretty much any kind of literature at the same time as it absorbs their formal elements. This makes it always appear as the most contemporary of forms, able to present the others as presences in time, ready to be incorporated within the novelistic body. In a sense, the other forms always appear as 'archaic', trapped within the novel's representation of time and space. But this is, as we have seen, an illusion. Each of the major cultural forms we have found in the Indian postcolonial novel in English so far – Indian classical music, folk-theatre, Indian classical dance, and finally, photography – have their own evolving, contemporary histories. Their 'archaisms' do not exist as frozen in time, but in a living relationship with their contemporary elements. The same is true of the novel. Joshi's for example, incorporates elements of contemporary science-fiction with the more 'archaic' elements of the historical novel or even the *bildungsroman*. And in addition to these literary resources, it mobilizes both 'archaic' and contemporary forms of photography in order to achieve its representational goals.

What we have here, then, is a specific environment of historical condition, as it manifests itself in former colonies and the new postcolonial nations, enabling a complex and rich representative act that we call the postcolonial novel form. Its stylistic exuberance, much commented on, is less a matter of imitating European modernism (although, clearly, there are stylistic influences and how, indeed, could there not be?) and more that of its ability to absorb and juxtapose the evolving and dynamic cultural forms that surround it. What we call the environment enters it as a theme, in its compulsive recording of the symbiosis between humans and non-humans, their physical surroundings, and the various movements and expressions of historical capital. But environment, understood precisely as the field of this symbiosis, is also registered in the formal architecture of the novel – in its absorption of the styles of the cultural and literary forms that surround it.

Notes

Introduction

1. I am not going into the vast literature on the different inflections of the term 'postcolonial' here. But I would like to note that the conceptualization of 'postcolonial' as a historical period and a marker of a particular stage in the formation of a world system of unevenly distributed capital yields two further related, but *cultural* concepts, that Graham Huggan (2001) calls 'postcolonialism' and 'postcoloniality'. For Huggan, the former is 'an anti-colonial intellectualism that reads and valorises the signs of social struggle in the fault lines of literary and cultural texts', while the latter is 'a regime of cultural value [which] is compatible with a worldwide market whose power now "extends over the whole range of cultural production" ' (p. 6). Huggan's conceptualization is useful in that it presents the varied and distinctive cultural correlates of the historical-material condition that we are calling 'postcolonial', and reveals the dynamics of contradiction inherent in them. We shall try to keep this distinction in mind when we further discuss the range of cultural texts and the regime of the marketplace in which they operate.

1. From Earth Day to Earth Summits: Trajectories and Debates

1. In addition to *The Ecology of Freedom* (1982), also see his *Our Synthetic Environment* (1963) and *Towards an Ecological Society* (1980) for an elaboration of his theory of 'social ecology'.
2. For a sample of these critical approaches, see Adamson et al., *The Environmental Justice Reader* (2002) and three of Mike Davis's hugely varied body of work – *Ecology of Fear* (1998), *Late Victorian Holocausts* (2001) and *Planet of Slums* (2007).

2. 'Green Postcolonialism' and 'Postcolonial Green'

1. We should note that concern with the proper 'grounding' and 'location' of postcolonial theory kept emerging and cannot always be read as metaphoric flourishes. For example, Stuart Hall's famous essay 'Cultural Identity and Diaspora' emphasized the territorial specificity of (Caribbean) postcolonial subjectivity – 'The Third, "New World" presence, is not so much power, as ground, place, territory. It is the juncture-point where the many cultural tributaries meet, the "empty" land (the European colonisers emptied it) where strangers from every other part of the globe collided' (Hall 1996, p. 118).
2. See Huggan, 'Decolonizing the Map', Hodge and Mishra, 'Aboriginal Place', Malcolm Lewis, 'Indigenous Map Making', Rushdie, 'Imaginary Homelands', Said, 'The Mind of Winter', Carter, 'Spatial History' and Huggan, 'The Postcolonial Exotic', all collected in Ashcroft et al. (2006).

3. See, for example, Lawrence Buell's periodization of cultural and literary eco-/environmentalism in his *The Future of Environmental Criticism* (2005).
4. See Dirlik (1997); Ahmad (1994); Lazarus (1999 and 1991); and Parry (2004).
5. Buell suggests that 'The first-second distinction should not, however, be taken as implying a tidy, distinct succession. Most currents set in motion by early ecocriticism continue to run strong … In this, "palimpest" would be a better metaphor than "wave"' (Buell 2005, p. 17).

3. Towards Eco-Materialism

1. For Timpanaro (1975), the anti-materialism within Marxism rises from a schism within Marx's own thinking. In what he calls 'early Marx' – up to *German Ideology* – Timpanaro does not find historical materialism proper. It is in the 'later' Marx – of *Capital* and beyond – that historical materialism, always already infused with an environmental perspective, is fleshed out as a conceptual category. For Timpanaro, subsequent European philosophical preference for the 'early' and not the 'later' Marx resulted in the weak or anti-materialist reactions.
2. Brennan suggests that on the one hand, postcolonial criticism's origins in the specific political and material conditions of late 1970s and 1980s US academia meant that it harboured the liberationist motifs and language it had derived from the anti-colonial struggles of the 1950s and 1960s. On the other hand, the extreme conservatism that prevailed (and continues to do so) in the US academy meant that it purchased its place there with an active hostility towards the theoretical and political traditions of those same anticolonial struggles.
3. See for example, Lenin's elaboration of the theoretical directions found in Engels in his *The Development of Capitalism in Russia* (Moscow: 1977) and *Imperialism: the Highest Stage of Capitalism* (Peking: 1975).

4. The River and the Dance: Arundhati Roy

1. This is not the place to recount the details of the Narmada Bachao Andolan ('Save the Narmada' campaign). Suffice to say that since the late 1980s, the attempts of the governments of the Indian states of Gujarat and Madhya Pradesh to construct a series of dams on the river Narmada has been met with one of the largest and best-coordinated popular movements in recent history. There has been a veritable flood of literature on the struggle: see Claude Alvarez and Ramesh Billorey (1987), Phillipe Cullet (2007) and Dilip D'Souza (2002). For a study of the economic and environmental effects of the large dam projects at a global scale, see Patrick McCully (1996).
2. 'India Shining' was the much-vaunted electoral slogan of the right-wing Indian Hindu supremacist Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) in 2004. It brought them a comprehensive electoral defeat. 'India Rising' was a week-long series of special reports that ran on the BBC World Service radio in 2007. These are just random samples of a stereotypical packaging of India as one of the world's leading economic success stories. For a more accurate account of the state of play, see Davis (2007).

3. I am using 'horizon' in the sense Fredric Jameson uses the term in the opening chapter of *Political Unconscious* – 'The book ... conceives of the political perspective not as some supplementary method, not as an optional auxiliary to other interpretive methods current today ... but rather as the absolute horizon of all reading and all interpretation' (2002, p. 1). What Jameson means by the political, I suggest, must fold within itself a concept of the environmental, to properly become itself.

5. Water/Land: Amitav Ghosh

1. For example, see Bose's analysis of Ghosh's work (2003, p. 15) – 'he is also the one who sees history as that trajectory of events that causes dislocations, disjunctions, movements and migrations, eventually replacing solid markers with shadow lines, destabilizing our notions of the past in the reverberations of the present'.
2. See especially his recent essays 'Folly in the Sudarbans' and 'The Tsunami of 2004', http://www.amitavghosh.com/essays/index.php (accessed 5 August 2009).

7. 'Blood on my Water': Ruchir Joshi

1. The 1967 Arab-Israeli war, for instance, is routinely explained in terms of conflicting national interests, neo-imperialism, 'Cold War' politics, ethnicity, race and so on. But its roots lay at least as much in 'water politics' as it did in these other factors. The head-waters of the Jordan river and the lower reaches of the Litani river have always been seen by Israeli policymakers as crucial to the existence of Israel as a Zionist state. When Syria began building dams and canals (legally, well within its own territory), Israeli leaders saw it as an existential threat and began preparing for war. Shimon Peres explicitly stated water as a cause of the conflict and Levi Eshkol declared 'This water is like blood in our veins.' See de Villiers (2001, pp. 220–4). Much of Israel's subsequent conflict with Lebanon can also be properly understood as an attempt to secure the Litani river, and much of the logic of its occupation of Palestinian lands in the West Bank and Gaza, as well as the building of the illegal settlements, is derived from the imperative to secure and manage water flows.
2. See Benjamin's two essays on photography and aura, 'The Work of Art in the Age of its Technological Reproducibility' and 'Little History of Photography' (Benjamin 2008).
3. I am not entering into the various controversies about the first 'Indian' novel here, but I am concerned with the writing and production of English-language novels in India. On the history of photography in India see Thomas (1981), Dehejia (2001) and Pinney (1998). On the early English novel in India see Joshi (2003) and Darnton (2002).
4. For an elaboration, see Fabian (1983). For an important application of the notion of coeval modernity in the field of historical scholarship, also see Harry Harootunian (2000).

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Index